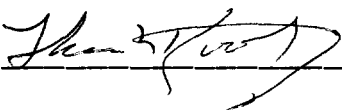


The Mother of Beauty
(a draft of a novel)

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by Daniel A. Clark

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely reading "Thomas Koontz", is written over a horizontal line.

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I.

She made the call.

Her hand rested on the receiver and a smooth polished fingernail tapped the curved plastic surface. A wonderful invention, the phone. Reach out and touch someone and still preserve your anonymity. Touch without contact. Sanitized communion of souls. Safe sex. She remembered a time when people did just fine with out it. When eye-to-eye was sufficient. Still, she did make the call. Now all she had to do was show up.

She tried to shrug off the feeling; she was just being cranky. Her hand left the phone and returned to the file on her desk. Newspaper clippings, notes, and photographs. They hardly told the whole story of the man. But then only she knew the whole story. Just her. And maybe one other...

But that was why it was so important that she made the call.

She knew him better than he knew himself. She understood the agony of living better than anyone. It had been three hundred years since she had seen him. She had already seen him on the street and she knew him at once.

She had waited in her car up the street from his office on a wet day in March. He'd come out of his office with the collar on his rain coat up, but she knew it was him anyway. As he walked towards her the swell of memory grew in her. He turned into the deli and she felt a nearly physical release. He was the one who used to be her husband. He was different now. She watched him through the plate glass of the sandwich shop. He was alone. He was suffering. His death had not been right and he had been returned to suffer the cruel world again. Would he know her? It would all be so easy if he did. But he probably would not, and she must proceed carefully. Mortality eroded the soul's memory. She would proceed carefully. More lives than hers were at stake, and she had already lost him once.

II.

Payne sat at the dark, wood-and-brass bar of The Tavern Restaurant watching the women who entered. He was betting against himself which one was his lunch date. The betting was going too well. So far it was twelve for twelve; none of them were here to see him. She'd sounded attractive on the phone, but they all sound attractive on the phone, he told himself. He sipped his beer. The woman's voice had sounded like fine wine and books. What books he didn't know. He sipped his beer. Rather taken with the voice, he'd decided to leave his gun at the office.

Around him couples and friends were talking and drinking and eating. He was the only one who was alone. He was getting bored and hungry. He tried not to get his hopes up. She was probably a plain, middle-class woman with three kids and scars from each one. A woman that was no Lauren Bacall. A pleasant woman, he imagined. A good mother, content to find happiness in the quiet seconds between the demands put on her by her family. He tried to hold that image in his mind-- never mind what such a nice, plain lady would want with him.

He sipped his beer, noticed the glass was empty and ordered another, his third. The bartender

was a young guy with dark hair and thick forearms. The sleeves of his white Oxford-weave shirt were rolled back twice. He brought Payne's beer and took his money and brought his change in smooth trips to the cash register. Payne absently smoothed his tie, and checked his watch. He paid for the beer and as he took his first sip, a gulp really, he caught his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. The suit, he was pleased to notice again, fit well. It didn't look cheap or shabby. His hair, brown and short, was like the rest of his appearance: simple. A plain face, a good jaw line, a strong body. He lit a cigarette.

He drank more beer, not trying to restrict himself to sips now. A pleasantly attractive brunette walked in, paused and scanned the bar. Not Lauren Bacall, but not bad. But also not quite the voice on the phone. Her eyes passed over him without hesitating and her face lit up and she walked to a forty-ish man in a gray suit who greeted her with a kiss and a smile. Payne took another drink. He'd asked her on the phone how he'd know who she was, but she'd said don't worry, I'll know you. So Payne had gotten here early to try and pick her out before she saw him. So far no luck. For all he knew she could already be here watching him watch for her for all he knew.

A woman with long black hair and pale skin, dressed in a gray blazer and skirt came in. This is absolutely, definitely her, he thought. It has simply got to be her. A hush fell over the restaurant, or maybe he imagined it. Somewhere down deep he felt a click. The look, the poise... and she walked straight to the bar without looking around, let alone at him, and ordered a white wine. Impossible, Payne thought. He drank more beer and thought about the mother of three some more, amazed he could have been so wrong about this one. Divorced, he decided, and fearful of an ex-husband who was an alcoholic. Or maybe still married to a good man who loved her but just wasn't capable of protecting his family...

"Mr. Payne, I'm Valerie Elmore."

He turned and it was the dark-haired beauty with the white wine.

"I believe we have a lunch date," she said and held out her hand.

He smiled, said hello, shook her hand. Eat your heart out Lauren Bacall.

They took their drinks to a table and ordered. Cajun chicken for her, fettuccini for him. The lighting was dim low-hanging globes. Only a few other people were eating and their conversation was a soft background murmur. Payne noticed the brunette he had seen come in. She was seated across from her gray-suited man, her hand on his arm.

"As I said on the phone, I am interested in hiring you."

The telephone did not do her justice. She spoke in the same manner as she walked. Confident, controlled. Restrained elegance. "I spoke to my lawyer who says he knows about these things, and he recommended you." She had an accent. Very, very subtle but there in her words. European, maybe, but he couldn't place it more specifically. Something in her vowels.

"What's his name?"

"Timothy Gerard."

Payne nodded. "We worked in the D.A.'s office together. I was an investigator at the same time he was a prosecutor." Unpleasant memories threatened to divert his attention from Valerie's straight, impossibly long, impossibly black hair. He noticed that her complexion was not as pale as he had first thought. She was light-complected, but her abundant black hair and dark clothes made her face striking. She wore a bit of eye-shadow and lipstick and clear polish on her nails. The rest was all her natural coloring. She was a cool beauty with strong Nordic features like an ice princess.

"He said you were a good man. Loyal and very professional at what you do. A good friend to have."

"Generous of him."

"I asked him why you quit--"

Payne's stomach muscles clenched.

"He said I should ask you."

"The job was intruding too much into my personal life."

"And this one does not?"

"This job I can decide what work I do or don't do."

She accepted that with a slow blink of her eyes, the way upper-class Englishmen do instead of nodding.

Their food came. It was good and they began to discuss business between bites.

"I mentioned 'protection work' when I called." The phrase was awkward for her, unnatural. It was not part of her vocabulary or her life.

"I told you my fee."

"Yes. Two hundred a day. I want you for twenty-four hour protection."

He shrugged. "Price stays the same."

"I am not worried about the price."

"Really? May I ask what you do?"

"I teach women's literature at the university, but I have enough," she hesitated a fraction of an instant, "family money that I do not out of necessity. Your fee is no problem." She said it naturally, with no ego or self-consciousness. He liked that. Few people with that kind of money could talk about it without being either embarrassed or pompous.

"That must be nice. What am I protecting you from."

"Oh it's not me." She leaned forward slightly. On someone else it might have been an unconscious gesture of fear, but on her it was a movement made out of confidence and intimacy. He felt that click again somewhere down deep. "It's a friend of mine, really. I am the one that is paying you, however."

"I see. Will she be joining us?"

"No. I wanted to meet you first to see if you are interested."

"And see if I met your approval."

"Yes."

He made a go-ahead gesture.

"My friend's name is Suzanne. She is an artist, a painter. We have been getting harassing phone calls recently--"

He raised a finger. "We?"

"Yes. She lives with me right now."

"What kind of harassment?"

"Threats. Obscene phone calls."

"And do you think you know who it is that's bothering you?"

"We know who it is."

"Go on."

"It is man Suzanne recently stopped seeing. He calls and threatens Suzanne with violence. Usually at night. Sometimes when I answer, he threatens me. The last several times he has called Suzanne pleading with her to come back to him. She tells him she will not and he becomes abusive and threatening." She spoke calmly, as if she was lecturing to a class on the religious symbolism of *The Faerie Queen*.

"She's afraid he'll carry out his threats."

"I'm afraid he will. She insists she is not intimidated, but I have heard some of the threats."

"When did she stop seeing him?"

"Two months ago."

"Was she living with you before that?"

"No. She was living with him. We have known each other quite well for a year or so. I first met her through mutual friends and her art."

"Why did she leave him?"

Valerie hesitated. "Suzanne left him because she discovered that she is a lesbian."

Payne raised his eyebrows. "Oh."

Valerie watched him. She took a bite of her chicken.

Payne took a mouthful of fettuccini, chewed it meditatively.

Valerie kept watching him, obviously waiting for something. She took a sip of her wine. Payne watched the way she held the glass in her left hand. There was something odd, yet eminently natural and graceful about the way her fingers caressed the rounded glass.

Payne realized she was waiting for him to ask a question. He asked it. "Are you?" He noticed she had incredibly dark eyes, so dark he couldn't see the pupils.

"We're lovers, yes," she said in her strange near-accent.

He nodded slightly several times, his head just bobbing, acknowledging the confirmation as he thought about that.

"Does that bother you?" Her tone was almost challenging.

"It doesn't matter," he said and thought, would it be sexist to think What a waste? Probably.

"Perhaps it does matter to me."

"All that should matter is how well I do my job."

She smiled a meaningless smile and tilted her head to one side. "Are you still interested in working for me?"

"Yes."

"Good."

They finished eating and Valerie stood to leave, explaining that she had an appointment elsewhere, that she would like to meet him for dinner tonight, this time with Suzanne, and give him more details then. They set the place and time, she paid the check and said goodbye. Payne sat alone at the table finishing his beer slowly. He smoked another cigarette.

To work for two women, gay women at that, would be a new experience. It should not have felt any different than any other job, but it did. His experience with women told him he shouldn't take the job. But his experience with unemployment told him otherwise. Valerie Elmore, heiress, professor, and lesbian. He stubbed out the cigarette.

The bright afternoon made him blink for a long time before his eyes adjusted. The air was still and hot and humid and he began sweating instantly. He turned right out of the restaurant and walked for awhile. He carried his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The traffic was busy, but not yet jammed as it would be in a few hours. Men and women jostled past him in a hurry to be someplace. Women in power-suits wearing Reeboks and carrying their pumps in Bloomie's bags. Men with furrowed brows, working on their ulcers. A plump, balding grocer stood in the doorway of his store, watching them hurry past, wondering what had happened to the neighborhood and where all his business had gone. Down an alley, not quite in the shadows, Payne saw an old man in a raincoat as wrinkled as a paper sack urinating on some trash. Payne stopped at a pay phone, checked the white pages book, inserted a quarter and dialed Timothy Gerard's office number. An expensive-sounding secretary answered and asked him to hold for Mr. Gerard. He had gone into private practice a few years after Payne left the D.A.'s office. Now he was dealing with a better class of criminal.

"How are you Payne," Gerard asked when he picked up.

"Sweating. Listen, I want to ask you some questions about a woman you referred to me."

"Valerie? She's a good friend, Payne. Did she hire you? I told her just that you were a good man."

"A glowing referral. What do you know about her problem?" There was a newspaper box near the phone. The headlines told about more murders in the city.

"Not a whole lot. Just that it was really her friend's problem. Susan. Suzanne. Old boyfriend problems."

"She tell you anything else."

"No."

"You believe her?"

"Same old suspicious Payne," he laughed. "No reason not to believe her."

"Except she hasn't gone to the cops about it."

"She's not your average citizen, Payne. Doesn't like to panic or make a public incident. Valerie likes to keep things quiet."

"What do you know about her girlfriend?"

"From what I hear Suzanne is a very talented painter. Never seen her stuff personally."

"If there was anything else going on, would she tell you?"

"What are you getting at."

"Is Valerie Elmore a lesbian?" Even though there was no one listening in, he felt as though he should lower his voice.

Gerard laughed hard and sudden. "Jesus, Payne. What a question! Not every feminist is a lesbian."

"You know know from experience, maybe?"

"Not Val. She doesn't socialize much if you know what I mean, but she's straight."

"Just checking the angles."

"Yeah. Any other stupid questions?"

"I'll call you."

Payne hung up and started walking toward his office. Somewhere near his building, he realized that Valerie Elmore had only four fingers on her left hand.

III.

He didn't know her yet.

She knew it was only a matter of time now, but for once, she was running out of time.

IV.

She saw him and the hostess moving toward their table. He wore a navy blazer, a pinstriped shirt with a tie that matched, and gray pants. He moved well in the clothes, just the barest indication of strength and swiftness. He wasn't big, but next to the small, round woman he looked imposing. His face was plain in repose. His brown eyes were blank.

Valerie stood as he approached, so Suzanne stood also. Valerie shook his hand and introduced him to Suzanne. He shook Suzanne's hand too weakly, and nodded and smiled. She knew all the signs of discomfort people felt when they knew about her. The signs were all over him. At least there were no inane pleased-to-meet-yous from him. They all sat and the waitress took their orders. She and Valerie ordered wine. Payne, of course, ordered a beer. Typical of a man to order beer.

"So you're the man Valerie's hired," she said. It was a stupid way to start a conversation,

but then the whole reason for being here was stupid.

"Yes. Would you like to tell me more about the situation," he said including Valerie in his question.

"Not really because there's nothing to tell," Suzanne said stiffly.

"Oh?" Payne looked at Valerie.

"Yes," Suzanne said sighing. "But Valerie has insisted and I owe her so the choice isn't really mine."

"Actually it is," said Payne, looking uncomfortable. He sipped his beer.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I haven't taken any money or made any promises." He looked back at Suzanne. "I may be a thug, but I won't force you to do anything."

Suzanne looked at him. He sipped his beer. Was he looking for a way out? She looked at Valerie who hadn't moved. She looked back at Payne who was gazing at her in his reposed way. He was hiding his discomfort well.

"Valerie and I have talked this over before and maybe she is right. I won't object."

"Fine," he said accepting her answer for what it was.

She looked out the window down at the river. In the darkness, with the lights dancing and swaying in the ripples and eddies, it looked clean and inviting. She took a drink, mentally toasting the river which moved on its way, never stopping, never looking back.

"Valerie has told me her-" his eye flicked over at Valerie "-version of the story. Why don't you tell me yours. Don't leave anything out."

Don't leave anything out? Could he possibly understand? No, she thought. No man would be able to know how she felt, what her new life had cost her. But she looked at him sitting there with that open, plain face and honest eyes and she thought maybe. Maybe a man who asked if she wanted his help and was ready to leave if she didn't could understand. It all came flooding back, filling every corner and she was angry at herself for her moment of weakness which left her feeling the emotions which she would not share with this stranger.

She remembered meeting Jon Kruse, a lawyer, at a party. A friend of a friend. She remembered enjoying his smile and conversation. Pretending to fall for his pass, sleeping with him, feeling unsatisfied as always but not admitting it even to herself, going through the motions of orgasm but never knowing one. Succumbing to the pressure of his need for her. The way he tried to understand her art, seeing him again and again, and moving in with him. He was loving, doting at first, perhaps sensing she was vaguely unsatisfied and trying to make up for it. But the months passed and he didn't understand her art and she didn't know what was missing, and tempers flared now and again but they subsided and he was so, so sorry and he cried and asked for her forgiveness because he loved her. She was moved and touched and tried harder to love him and she went to parties with him and hung on his arm and kept his home and tried and tried to feel something in bed.

Until the day Jon's sister Allison came for a visit and while Jon was at work, Suzanne and Allison talked about art and Jon, who never understood his independent sister. Suzanne was fixing sandwiches for lunch with Allison and she brushed her hand and she felt an electric tingle and knew why she wasn't happy with Jon and they made love in the bed where she had tried desperately, vainly to feel something with Jon. And he walked in and was destroyed by the sight of his sister and his lover making love. And the shouting and the crying and the hitting and the running and the leaving and losing and coming to Valerie who accepted her and gave her space to let her heal her wounds. Space, she thought coldly, that was being limited by the presence of this stranger.

She told it quickly. No details, no emotion. He sat quietly, trying not to intrude any further and feeling uneasy in the presence of the women. Valerie was touching Suzanne's hand lightly. He felt as though he were breathing in a strongly feminine atmosphere and it made him self-conscious.

Their food had come during Suzanne's story and he ate slowly while Suzanne finished. There was a lot that was going unsaid, but it was nothing he needed or had a right to know.

Suzanne was younger than Valerie. He hadn't thought about Valerie's age before, but Suzanne was probably around twenty-five. Next to her, Valerie's age was impossible to say. Valerie didn't look past her mid-thirties, but she seemed much older. Maybe it was simply the contrast between the two women that created the effect. Valerie, in a gray dress with long sleeves, was very refined and distant-looking. Her hair and eyes were still as black as before, but blacker than he'd remembered them after she left. Suzanne was shorter, had short, wavy, red hair cut in a bob. She wore a green dress with a matching bolero jacket that brought out her pale green eyes.

She gave him a picture of Kruse. He was not a big man, maybe 5'10" at most. He had dark hair and sharp features. He was laughing in the picture, surrounded by green. The picture looked like it had been taken in a park.

"When did the phone calls begin," he said in a neutral tone.

"About two weeks after I left," Suzanne said, her voice as stiff as before.

Valerie sat on the fringe of the dialogue simply observing and listening.

"What were they like?"

"He wanted me to come back. And to see a therapist." She grimaced. "Said he'd be willing to pay."

"Generous."

"I told him no, of course. That I couldn't come back and be what he wanted anymore. I'd always known there was something wrong with our relationship. When I discovered my own sexuality, I suddenly saw how emotionally abusive he was. I told him it was over. Period." She drank some wine. "He called everyday. Crying usually. I still said no. Tried to be gentle and understanding, but I still said no."

"Then there was a week when he stopped calling. I thought maybe he was finally seeing someone. A psychologist, I mean. It's funny. The same thing that showed me the answers to so many of my problems was what revealed all of his. He started calling again, but this time he was

threatening. Said I'd pay for doing this to him. I'd try to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. He got fairly graphic. He started threatening Valerie to me. He'd call her and threaten her directly."

"They say you should report harassment and obscene phone calls to the police."

"I didn't want the police involved. He has enough problems."

"Did you feel guilty?"

Very coldly, she said, "No."

"But now you feel you're in danger. Why not let the police do something about it."

"I don't think I'm in danger."

"But I do," Valerie injected.

"Why?" Payne asked. He glanced at her left hand. The pinky was missing. The hand still curved out and down to her wrist but the spot where her little finger should be was empty. The skin was smooth, and there was no stump.

"His threats were very convincing," Valerie said. "She hasn't told you about the note."

Suzanne suddenly looked tired, emotionally exhausted. She bent down and picked up her purse from beside her chair. She rummaged through it for several seconds. It was small and a shade of green that matched her dress. Suzanne checked both side pockets before looking in the middle zipper pocket. Payne realized that she was deliberately taking too long. That she didn't want to show it to him. Finally she pulled out an envelope that had been torn open. The outside was bare; it had not been addressed. The loose bits of paper at the tear looked jagged and twisted and sharp, like shark's teeth. She handed it to Payne.

He unfolded the paper. She watched his eye move over the obscene words. Her face was flushed with embarrassment and anger. He folded it and replaced it in the envelope.

"I just don't think he's capable of even coming close to doing it," said Suzanne. "If you could have heard him, you'd know how much like a child he is now. Like a poor, castrated little boy."

"I don't know him," said Payne. "But he sounds dangerous to me."

"I agree," said Valerie quietly.

Suzanne shrugged and shook her head. She was tired, emotionally tired and didn't want to tell Payne any more. "Maybe. I don't know anymore."

"I also think the police should know."

"No. I won't do that to him."

"Are you still willing to let Valerie hire me?"

She looked at him. Her mouth moved like she was chewing the inside of her cheek in thought. Her pale-green eyes were steady.

"Yes," she finally said.

They finished eating and prepared to leave. Payne said that he would come to the house early tomorrow morning, and Valerie gave him the address. He thanked them for dinner and left. Valerie paid the bill, and she and Suzanne left.

Valerie drove them home in her gray BMW.

Keeping at least two cars back, Payne followed them in his rust-colored Plymouth. He had the radio off. Just the sound of the wheels to listen to.

They changed highways once and got off about ten miles out of the city. A few turns and up a hill, and Valerie's car went through a gate and up a driveway to her house. Payne kept going past the gate and pulled over and shut off the engine. A polished metal plate with numbers matching the address Valerie had given him was bolted to the gate.

He got out of the car and walked back to the gate. The gate was made of iron bars set in a fence that stood ten feet tall and slightly spiked at the top. It was only a little unfriendly-looking. One side of the gate was left open, leaving enough room for one car at a time to pass through. Trees grew just inside the fence on both sides of the drive and formed a privacy screen. Standing at the gate, Payne could just see the house from the road. It wasn't enormous, but it was too big for just one or two people. It looked eighteenth century and probably had a garden and a gazebo around the back. The screen of trees was not thick, but it looked like it got thicker on either side of the property where the incline also looked steeper.

He looked around a few times and skulked up the driveway. The garage was separate from the house on the left and a light pole was set to the left of the driveway. Payne stayed out of the light and went around the garage to the back of the house. He was right. There was a gazebo and a garden and the trees did get thicker around the edge of the property on this side of the house. The rest of the property was too dark to see. He went over a set of French windows. There was light coming from this room. He leaned against the side of the house and peeked in through the glass.

It was a living room or den of some kind. Valerie was curled up on a couch, reading some papers, still wearing the dress she'd had on at dinner. Her shoes were off and a small pile of papers were sitting on a coffee table in front of her. She had a pen in her hand and was making small marks on the papers she was reading. Grading essays, he figured.

He stepped back and moved away from the house toward the gazebo. One other light was on. An upstairs light. After a while it went out.

Payne crouched low next to the gazebo.

The light in the living room stayed on.

Payne stayed crouched. He resisted the urge to light a cigarette. The flame and the glow of the cigarette might alert someone looking out the window. Crouched where he was, he was nearly invisible.

After a half an hour of waiting, the living room light went out.

Payne stayed crouched. His knees ached so he shifted his position.

A different light went on upstairs.

Payne crouched and watched.

The light went out.

Payne crouched and watched.

Nothing happened.

Payne slowly stood, feeling the cracking in his knees. He looked around the dark yard. Nothing had changed. He skulked back around the house and down the driveway and to his car. He lit a cigarette, smoked it with the window cracked open. Then he lit another and drove home to his bed.

V.

7:30 a.m.

Payne packed a gym bag with clothes and his gun.

He zipped the bag, finished off his coffee and rinsed the cup out in the sink. He put on a light windbreaker that would be too hot later in the day, but he needed something to cover the shoulder rig he would be wearing. He didn't think Suzanne would appreciate it if he wore his sombrero and crossed bandoleers and carried six-guns as he tagged along with her all day. He grabbed the bag and paused at the door. There was no one to call "Goodbye, Honey" to, so he didn't. He locked the deadbolt behind him and went down and the waiting taxi drove him out of the city. The driver was sullen, and that was fine with Payne.

Last night, he'd met Suzanne who'd reluctantly agreed to hire Payne. Valerie said she was hiring Payne to protect Suzanne from Jon Kruse, her ex-lover. Suzanne didn't think Kruse *could*, and much less, would hurt her. Payne wasn't sure.

He *did* think Valerie Elmore was lying to him. The women were not sharing a bedroom. If Gerard was right, Valerie was not a lesbian.

So here he was, on his way to protect a woman who didn't want his protection and who maybe didn't need it, in the employ of another woman who was lying to him. He was doing no better than usual.

Past the one-room office supply stores and the copy shops, past high-rise apartments and the hospital to the highway where garbage collected along the grassy median and the road side. By summer the grass would be brown and stiff. They went past smokestacks. They drove by neighborhoods that had once been fashionable where the few remaining original owners hid in front rooms that used to be called parlors. Now there were dead-bolt locks and peepholes on their doors.

The taxi changed highways and drove past fields where weeds grew. The weeds became trees which became a kind of thin woods. They left the highway and drove over and around the hills where the rich and the beautiful lived. Finally, the taxi drove up the road that he'd followed Valerie's car last night. The driver stopped at the gate. Payne got out and paid the fare. The cabbie drove away without comment. Payne and his gym bag walked up the driveway to the walk to the door and pushed the bell. Valerie opened the door and invited him in.

She was wearing a pale blue skirt and a white blouse. Her hair was pulled back in a French braid. She looked fabulous and asked him if he'd had breakfast. He said yes. She showed him up to a spare bedroom, said make yourself comfortable and left, explaining that she had to leave soon to teach

a class at the university.

The room was plain. A queen-sized bed and dresser that looked antique. A mirror and a closet. The room was furnished well, but it felt empty, drained of life. As soon as Valerie had left the light seemed to go out of the room. He was putting his extra bullets and socks in a dresser drawer when Suzanne knocked on the room's open door.

"Good morning," she said with no meaning. She was leaning against the door frame with her arms folded.

Payne closed the drawer. "Good morning."

She was wearing an extra large Lakers T-shirt and, as far as Payne could tell, nothing else. She had a just-woke-up look, but her mouth was a strained line and her eyes were hard.

"Is there an agenda for today," he asked.

"I have to go to the gallery today to help out with some lighting arrangements and take some paintings over. I'm preparing for a showing of my stuff. I also have a lunch date. Probably take most of the afternoon." She spoke precisely and plainly.

"Sounds tame. I'm ready when you are." He tried to sound friendly but it rang hollow in the dead room.

She pivoted on her heel and walked off toward wherever the bathroom was. Payne heard the door close and the water come on.

Payne went down the hall where she'd come from and found her bedroom. It was a room like his, except hers looked lived in and she had a bathroom and shower. The bed sheets were in disarray and the open closet was full of clothes. There was a box full of cassette tapes on the floor next to the dresser. The drawers contained clothes. No surprises. There were two other bedrooms like Payne's; furnished but not lived in.

There was one other empty bedroom, Valerie's room, a hall closet, and a door to the attic. Valerie's bedroom had a connecting bathroom, a bed that had already been made, a small bookshelf, a dresser full of clothes, a closet full of clothes, a nightstand, and a lamp. No surprises. All very clean and orderly.

Behind the attic door was a set of steps that went up to a landing and turned. Payne couldn't see anything else without going up the stairs.

He heard the shower stop and he closed the door and went downstairs to the first floor.

Again, no surprises.

A dining room, the living room he'd seen Valerie in last night, a kitchen, and a den. The furniture all looked antique and well-crafted. It reminded him of the furniture his uncles had built for a living. He thought about the time he spent living with them and the carpentry they'd taught him as he ran his thumb along the beveled edge of a table. The tables and cabinets and the grandfather clock looked like they'd been built in place in each room and never moved. Everything was solid, stable and placed exactly right in each room. The antiques were mixed well with modern appliances in the kitchen and the TV and VCR in the den. There were paintings on the walls of the living room he hadn't seen last

night. A ship at sea and a woman sewing. Despite the fine furnishings, the house seemed somehow empty. The house was neat and apparently dust free. Like a museum.

Near the foot of the stairs there was a study. There was a large, solid desk that was clear of papers and a swivel chair, three walls lined with books, a bay window looking out into the backyard, and, near the window, a two chairs to sit in and read and look outside on summer and winter days. Between the chairs was a small table on which rested a vase of flowers and a book. He looked at the title. *Orlando*. The books that covered other walls were arranged in the vague order of someone who knew the books well enough not to need a system of ordering them. There were new and ancient books mixed together. There were volumes in French, German, Italian, and English. This was her room, where she lived. It had the comfortable disorder of a home that was missing in the rest of the house.

Suzanne was standing in the doorway. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt now. Her hair was damp.

"Everything is already in the van and ready to go. Whenever you're done snooping." She looked at him steadily. She'd had time to regret her openness with him now. She was didn't want him around and was stuck with him. He was an outsider again, no matter how much he knew about her.

The van was obviously hers; it was well-used and did not go with the rest of the house. In the the back of the van in the garage there were several paintings covered with protective cloths. Suzanne drove, pulling out of the garage and down the drive and down the hill to the highway.

They were silent until they reached the city.

"Payne," she said. "You don't really think I need protecting, do you." She said it in a bored, condescending manner.

"Do you?"

She sighed, blowing hair off her forehead. "I don't know."

"Valerie thinks you do."

She shrugged and drove.

The name of the place, The New Bloomsbury Gallery, was bigger than the actual building. A warehouse downtown with the brick walls painted white and a new ceiling put in with fluorescent lights and an office in back. Several young-looking men and women were sweeping dust around the floor and fooling around with some floor lights and hanging hooks on the walls.

They greeted her warmly and when she introduced Payne, they all looked at him with silent distrust and unloaded the van, stowing her paintings away until there was a place to hang them. A brown-skinned man who looked about thirty-five came out of the office and gave Suzanne a hug.

"David," she said, "this my watchdog. Valerie has taken it upon herself to hire him for my protection." They shook hands. He had a wiry build and glasses. Like most people here, he was wearing paint-flecked jeans and a T-shirt.

"I'm David Juran. I'm the owner of the gallery." He turned on a smile that was used on critics and financiers. Juran had convinced the city to buy the building five years ago and turn it into a

showplace for new, young artists. It was open sporadically. Juran also wrote for the city magazine, but this place was his baby. He had imagined it would stimulate an intellectual and artistic growth in the city. So far, his dreams had not been realized.

"Well we sure are glad that Suzanne's got someone to watch out for her these days," he said. "I can tell you, I worry about this lady." He gave Payne a phony wink. Suzanne rolled eyes and sighed impatiently.

"Perhaps we can talk later," Payne said.

"Fine, fine," Juran said. "Suzanne I've got some advertisements and posters I want you to look at." He slid his arm over her shoulders the way a Hollywood agent does and went back into his office with her, leaving Payne alone. He went and stood near the office where he could hear their voices in case Darth Vader tried to come in the back way and make off with Suzanne. The other people worked around Payne, sweeping the dusty floor and covering cracks in the wall and hanging paintings. Payne stood away from them. No one told him to help. No one said hey fella gimme a hand here. They ignored him except for when he was in the way. Then they said "excuse me, please" and went back to ignoring him. Payne stood in a corner watching the activity. Suzanne came back and joined in the work, pointedly ignoring him. They rolled out white blocks on which they stood twisted hunks of metal. They fussed over the lights some more. Payne stood until his lower back began to ache and kept standing. He was hot and bored.

Near lunchtime, a big blonde woman came in the back door of the gallery. She looked vaguely familiar to Payne. Suzanne saw her too, and smiling and they kissed and laughed and talked. Once or twice the blonde looked at him. Suzanne was obviously telling her about him. Neither looked very happy about him. Payne hoped it was the lunch date Suzanne had mentioned; his stomach was rumbling.

The two women walked toward him.

"Payne, this is Allison Kruse."

Payne smiled and felt uncomfortable some more.

He brought the drinks and sandwiches back to the table. He saw that Allison and Suzanne were holding hands across the table. He set their drinks and food down and the women looked up at him. Feeling foolish he said, "Why don't I sit at the bar and give you some privacy."

He left the table before they could make polite protests. Actually, he was pretty sure they wouldn't protest. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar face at the bar, but no, he didn't know her. She had dark hair, almost as dark as Valerie's and almost as long. She was wearing a brown blouse and a long, brown skirt and black high-heeled boots and she was apparently alone, drinking a martini. There were two empty stools next to her. I'm working, he thought and chose the one farthest from her. He ate his sandwich and drank his beer. When he finished, he ordered another beer.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

He turned and she was talking to him.

"What?"

"I thought you said something."

"Oh. No."

"Oh." She shrugged. "Well, now that the ice is broken, let me introduce myself. I'm Irene Flood." She held her hand out and he took it.

"Payne."

"P-A-I-N?"

"P-A-Y-N-E."

"Oh." She laughed suddenly. "Your mother must've really enjoyed delivering you to name you that."

He smiled, carefully not thinking about how that wasn't really funny or that he'd hardly known his mother.

"I saw you when you came in, but I thought you were with," she inclined her head toward Suzanne and Allison.

"Nope," he said. "Just a fifth wheel."

"How nice for me." She sipped at her drink.

"And me," he heard himself saying, knowing that he was working and would have to leave when Suzanne wanted to go. But he'd said it, it was too late to stop it, and she scooted over onto the stool next to him, and they were talking, and she was obviously interested. She had fantastic eyes. The third woman in two days with simply marvelous eyes, and maybe, just maybe, this one wasn't lying to him and wasn't homosexual.

"Are you here alone then?"

"Not exactly."

She raised her eyebrows. Go on, they said to him.

"Private security."

"What an interesting line of work. I didn't think you were an artist."

"What gave me away."

She smiled. "The gun."

She was good. The only giveaway was that he was wearing a windbreaker and a small break in the jacket's line under his arm.

"You know Suzanne?"

"I've seen her work," she said and tossed her hair with a casual motion. "She's good."

"Hmm."

"You must feel uncomfortable tagging along with a couple of lesbians."

Payne drank some beer.

Irene looked over at Suzanne and Allison. "They're very attractive. I bet you can't help but think what a waste," she smirked slightly. "Most men would." Her eyebrow was raised with a meaning that nothing to do with what she was saying.

"Yes," Payne admitted.

"Maybe feel a little frustrated, a little threatened."

Payne finished his beer and ordered another. "So you know who I am and what I do. What about you."

She smiled. "I'm an historian. I live in Boston. I'm consulting at the history museum and lecturing at the university for a couple weeks." She had her elbows on the bar and her fingers clasped near her chin. He admired the curve of her wrist.

"I know a professor there. Valerie Elmore."

"Interesting. Isn't she a dyke too?"

He was silent for a moment.

"You're rather cruel, aren't you."

"Yes. But I'm not a dyke."

He was half way through his second beer when he glanced over at Suzanne's table and he wished he hadn't.

Jon Kruse was standing in front of Suzanne's table, and he didn't look friendly. His fists were clenched and Suzanne was looking at him harshly. No one else in the place had noticed anything out of the ordinary yet.

"Scuse me. I have to go to work." Payne slid off his seat.

"Perhaps we'll see each other again," she said watching him go.

Payne moved behind Kruse.

Suzanne's eyes flicked to him. "Payne," she said in warning tone.

Kruse spun around. He was shorter than Payne and not as fast. Payne grabbed him under his arm and squeezed.

"Time to go," Payne said in a low tone.

"Payne," Suzanne said again.

"Who the hell are you," Kruse said through clenched teeth.

"I'm her fairy godmother," Payne said, squeezing harder and holding him off-balance.

"Payne, let him go."

"I just wanted to talk to her. You heard her. That's my sister there. I have a right."

"Payne."

Frustrated and angry, Payne said. "I've been asked to keep you away from her. So leave."

"Suzanne," Kruse looked over his shoulder.

"Payne, you're fired."

"Leave." Payne squeezed harder and then let go. He hoped the guy would take swing at him.

Kruse looked at Suzanne angrily and at Payne. He looked to see if anyone had noticed the confrontation. If they had, they didn't care. Kruse walked swiftly out of the bar.

"Payne you bastard you are fired." Suzanne was pale and fierce-looking. Allison had been quiet through it all. She looked at the window. He noticed that she was probably bigger than her

brother.

Payne looked around. Irene was gone.

"Yeah, " he said. "I guess I am."

VI.

Payne walked to his office. By the time he got there his shirt was sweat-stained under his arms and down his back. He checked his mail. There was subscription offer from Soldier of Fortune, a postcard from Salt Lake City asking him if he was saved, a letter from a former client whose wife had run off again and he wanted Payne to chase her again, and a reminder from his dentist to make an appointment to have his teeth cleaned. Payne threw it all in his wastebasket. The only message on his machine had been left by a computer who was offering a wonderful vacation package to Maui.

He unlocked the hot and stuffy office and tossed his keys on the desk. They slid across the empty surface and onto the floor. He didn't pick them up. Instead he opened the window which did nothing but confirm it was still hot outside. The heat and exhaust rose from the street. He dropped his jacket and gun and holster on the faded couch under the window. He turned on the small tape player. Muddy Waters played "She's Nineteen Years Old." He sat in his swivel chair and took a bottle of whiskey out of the bottom desk drawer. He opened it and took a pull.

Dust motes swirled in the sunlight streaming into the office. There was a bright rectangle on the floor next to him. He watched his shadow take another drink. He kicked his shoes off and pulled his socks off and propped his feet up on the desk. He lit a cigarette and blew smoke into the sun. He wiggled his toes.

The dust swirled and floated on air currents he couldn't feel. Danced to rhythms and harmonies he couldn't hear. The music of the spheres? Who knew what dust motes danced to. Dancing sun beans. He remembered his mother. When he was young, he asked her what that was moving in the light and he tried to grab it. It's a sun beam she said, not quite understanding him. Sun beans, he thought she said. Sun beans danced in the light and swirled around his hand as he tried to catch them.

He drank and shut that memory away.

Muddy was playing "Boom, Boom, Boom."

Unemployed and drunk. Again. An image of his father came from somewhere. His father, the giant with the big, scarred hands. Pulling Payne against his chest, his breath reeking, tears flowing. And then releasing him and Payne standing with his uncles, his mother's brothers, near the gray concrete wall as his father went away to prison.

Of course that wasn't the way it had happened, but it was a child's memory. True, if not accurate. His father's breath hadn't reeked at the time, he knew. He'd dried out in the county jail by then. And there had been a quick hearing before prison. But Payne didn't remember those details as clearly as he could those hands and the smell of alcohol.

Payne drank.

The sunlight moved across the floor. He lit another cigarette.

Somewhere near the bottom of the bottle, sometime when the yellow rectangle was creeping up the wall and the light in the office was fading, long after the tape had run out, there was a knock at the door. He managed to croak something near "Come in."

Through the swirl of glittering dust, he saw her black hair and eyes and thought it was Valerie, but no, it was Irene from the bar. She shut the door behind her.

He squinted at her through the dust.

"Rough day," she said. "I know what you need." She was wearing the same blouse and skirt and boots as when he'd seen her before. She was wearing a necklace he hadn't noticed before.

He shook his head to clear it.

She moved through the rays of light and sat on the edge of his desk. An ivory charm on a gold chain caught the light and sent reflections zinging around the room. She moved the near-empty bottle and sat on the desk. He didn't move. He felt sad and hopeless. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth. She stood and moved behind the chair. Her arms reached around him and her hair fell across his chest. She moved her hands over his chest. He reached up and put his hand in her hair and pulled her face to his. They kissed. They pulled at each other and, buttons and buckles and zippers later, their clothes were off and he was sitting on the desk and her legs were wrapped around him. Her eyes were closed and they rocked together. She chewed on his lip and he felt her teeth against his shoulder. He dug his hand into her hair and the other one pressed against the small of her back.

She pushed him down flat on the desk and was off him and bent over him. His hands pulled in her hair and she took him in her mouth and he shuddered and gasped. The lamp fell off his desk. The bottle fell to the floor and shattered.

She was kissing him again and they rolled as best they could on the desk. She kneeled on the desk and he kneeled behind her, his body covering hers. She was still wearing her boots and her toes hooked around the backs of his knees pulling him tighter to her and they rocked back and forth and she gasped and cried and he pressed harder and they trembled and shook together.

VIII.

They were on the couch and it was night. The office was cool now. The window was open and night traffic noise came into the office. He lay on his back and she was sitting on her heels, straddling his waist. She traced a knife scar on his chest.

"Did it hurt," she said and leaned over and kissed it and traced it with her tongue.

"I've felt worse."

She got up. "I'm going to turn the light on. I want to see your body."

"There's a switch on the wall. Be careful. The floor is wet." Her body was ghostly white. Her hair, above and below, was invisible in the night darkness. Her full thighs curved down and stopped below her knees where her boots were and became invisible too. She moved across the room and he heard the clicking of her heels, but it looked like she floated.

The light came on and she was standing there, naked. She looked at the floor and looked back at Payne.

"The floor isn't wet from whiskey, Payne."

He looked down. Blood was pooled among the shards of glass that were scattered across the floor on one side of the desk. He looked at his feet. They were bloody and the couch was stained. He noticed that the toes of Irene's boots were wet.

"I didn't feel it," he said. He lifted a foot and pulled it around so he could see the bottom. Pieces of glass glistened wetly.

"Let me," she said. She grabbed the desk chair and pulled it over. He told her there was a little first-aid in the desk. She got that and sat near his feet and pulled on over onto her lap. With tweezers she poked and pulled at the shards in his foot. They made small noises when she dropped them in the trash can.

"Ouch."

"Come on. A minute ago you didn't even feel it."

He grinned and winced.

"Like I said, I've felt worse."

"Like what. Tell me." She looked into his eyes as if she could see inside his head. Blood stained her thighs and her hands.

He held out his forearm. White circles of twisted skin dotted the inside of his upper forearm. "This."

She looked up from his foot. Blood streaked her cheek where she had brushed her hair back. "What is it?"

"Cigarette burns."

"Your parents."

"My father."

"Did it hurt?"

"The worst I've ever felt," he said looking at the spots of gnarled flesh. The air in the office was thick with harsh memories.

She breathed deeply. She wiped the blood off his foot with a tissue and put iodine on the foot and wrapped it in a gauze bandage. She lifted the other foot to her lap and kissed the ankle.

"What else did they do to you." There was blood on her chest and more streaks on her face.

He shook his head. He wanted a cigarette.

"How old were you?"

"Three. Five. I don't remember for sure." His head was thick with memories and booze. He remembered those hands again and the hardness of them. They had an iron grip and calluses like wood. He flexed his own hands. His forearms swelled. The scars whitened even more. He felt weak, like he'd lost too much blood. More glass tinked in the trash.

"Done," she said and kissed the foot and bandaged it.

She put away the kit and threw the bloody bandages away. She stood. Blood was on her thighs, her stomach and her breasts. Streaks of blood in her face. Her hands were bloody, her forearms, even her upper arms. Drips of blood ran down her thighs to her boots and glistened wetly on the leather.

"Don't I look a sight," she said. Desire swelled dizzily in him, pressing the memories into the shadows as she posed for him and spun around as if showing off a new, cruel garment.

IX.

Payne woke up in his bed.

His feet were sore and bandaged but he was able to walk around slowly. His apartment was empty. He smoked and drank coffee and watched the Today show. He called Valerie Elmore's house but there was no answer. He called the university and found out her office hours. He did pushups until his arms quaked. He did sit-ups until he couldn't lift his body. He began to feel almost human again. He looked at his tender feet and decided not to go running.

He showered, dressed, shirt, pants and tie and drove to the university. He parked illegally and sat on a bench in the quad with a cigarette. Students were lying in the sun, sleeping with their books or were sitting under trees in groups talking about "The Waste Land". The air was sticky and there were big puffy clouds in the sky. The weatherman was predicting a thunderstorm late in the afternoon.

Payne's body ached. Muscles had been stretched and strained in unusual ways. When he showered, he'd discovered scratches and bite marks. The marks were not too different from those left by a fight.

He looked at his watch and walked slowly to Valerie Elmore's office. It was on the third floor and her door was open. He knocked and shut the door behind him. The office was not much more than a cubicle. Shelves of books lined the walls and piles of papers covered the desk. He noticed that all these books were in English. Valerie wore her hair pulled back and a forest-green top. She folded her hands and Payne noticed again that missing finger and wondered how it happened, whether it was a birth defect or an old accident.

"It's almost finals time," he said. "The students are all out taking in the sunshine and studying."

She nodded.

"Suzanne fired me," he said. "I figured I should tell you in person that I won't work over her objections."

"Perhaps you also wanted to be paid?"

"No. It wasn't even half a day's work."

"Nonetheless." She took four fifties out of her purse and set them before him on her desk.

Payne looked at them. "I figured maybe you might want to tell me what I was really doing for you."

"Suzanne moved out of my house yesterday," Valerie said. "I shouldn't have tried to protect her like a parent."

"No. You weren't lovers were you?"

She looked somewhere past his left shoulder. He coal black eyes told him nothing.

"It's okay," he said. "People lie to me a lot. Especially clients. I'm used to it."

"I apologize for the inconvenience we caused you and the waste of your time."

"I'd rather find out the truth."

"Perhaps someday I will call you and ask you to dinner and tell you the story," she said. "Not now."

Payne nodded.

"You left some clothes at my house."

"Keep them as a guarantee on the dinner." He got up, leaving the four fifties on her desk and left the office closing the door behind him.

He went home and poured himself a drink and looked at his feet. Walking had made them bleed a little so he washed and rebandaged them and laid in the couch and read a book. In the afternoon he fixed himself sandwich and smoked and tried looking at the TV. He thought about calling Irene and even tried to remember what hotel she'd said she was at. He dozed. When he woke up, it was dark and raining a clean spring shower. He fixed another sandwich for dinner.

The phone rang. It was Irene.

"You're alone aren't you," she said.

The rain made interesting drip patterns on the windows. An occasional gust of wind made the rattling noise of the rain louder and the rain hit the window harder. He looked at an ashtray filled with butts. With one hand he tapped a cigarette from the pack, stuck it in his mouth, and lit it.

"You want me to come over don't you," she said.

After a long pause, he said yes.

"I know exactly what you need."

He braced himself with two martinis before she got there.

X.

Suzanne lay back in the tub, only her face above the waterline. She closed her eyes and

listened to the amplified sound of her breathing. She drifted pleasantly away from all the tensions of the day, away from the gallery, away from Valerie, away from Jon, away from Payne.

At last, when all that mattered was right here, right now, she rose from the water and dried in a thick towel and put on a long robe and drained the water from the tub.

Allison lay on the bed wearing only a pair of cotton briefs watching TV. It was a late-night talk show and the sound was down. An ice bucket and a bottle of wine were on the dresser beside the bed. Suzanne stretched languidly across the bed and rested her head on Allison's stomach.

"Feel better," Allison asked.

"Mmm."

Allison ran her fingers through Suzanne's wet hair while Suzanne made sounds of contentment.

"I was wondering," Suzanne murmured.

"Yes, love."

"If you could tell me."

"Yes, love."

"What kind of an uncouth yokel drinks wine cold."

"Good question."

"Mmm."

"Your kind."

"Mmm."

They lay on the bed like that for a while until Allison got up to pour some wine. She poured two glasses and handed one to Suzanne who rolled over on her stomach.

"In celebration of your exhibition," Allison said and raised her glass.

"It hasn't opened yet."

"A celebration nonetheless."

"You're supposed to celebrate with champagne."

"I like wine."

"Chilled?"

"Chilled."

"Yokel."

"Drink."

They did and Allison refilled the glasses. Allison was big-breasted which Suzanne never thought she would care for, but they were soft and round and a good place to rest one's head afterwards. Allison had loved both men and women and was comfortable in her sexuality. She was receptive and patient-- an excellent lover for Suzanne to discover her own sexuality with. Allison sat on the bed and they kissed for a long time. She undid the robe and pushed it off Suzanne's shoulders and it fell around her waist and lap in a warm, soft pile. Suzanne let her hand move over the flesh of Allison's huge, glorious breasts, her fingertips moving with the lightest feather touch, raising goosebumps from Allison's skin. She was so beautiful, Allison was, and so loving. And Suzanne opened

her eyes and saw Allison's face and she had such a sorrowful little smile that Suzanne's eyes filled with tears, and she felt a release somewhere down in her soul as if the weight of the world had been lifted.

"What're you crying for stupid," said Allison and felt her own eyes fill.

"Nothing, nothing," She said because there was so much to say but she knew her voice would never work and she'd be crying too hard so why say it, but she tried and she was right her voice wouldn't work and she was crying now, sobbing. Allison held her against that big soft chest of hers and Suzanne felt just like a baby and she could tell that Allison was crying too. They both knew why although neither one could say it now. It was such a small thing to know really, but it meant everything to be held gently by someone who loved you and, more importantly, understood you.

XI.

Valerie moved from room to room in the empty house.

Suzanne's bedroom was empty but still bore the signs of recent use. Two or three extra hangers hung in the closet. The bed was made, but in a hasty, rumpled way.

Valerie lay on the bed, rested her head on the pillow that smelled like Suzanne's hair, and closed her eyes.

Payne was right. They hadn't been lovers. But at another time they would have been. Valerie had acted stupidly and now she was alone again. She'd pushed away someone who loved her. Never mind it was for her own good.

And Payne. What about Payne? He was the one she'd waited for, but now it may be too late. How ironic that she should run out of time when that was all she'd ever had, all she'd ever known. She had a birthday only a few weeks ago, but she had not celebrated. She'd stopped celebrating when her husband had died. She'd stopped counting almost two hundred years ago.

She lifted her arm which weighed a ton and looked at her watch. She'd been lying here for three minutes. Or maybe it had been twenty-four hours and three minutes. No, it was still raining. Or maybe it was raining again and she'd been here for a week and a half. It was raining harder. She lifted her arm over to where she could see it again. Two hours had passed since she last looked.

It was happening again. She was losing control of time. Just. Like. Last. Time.

She. Watched. As. Her. Arm. Fell. Slowly. To The Bed And it bounced slightly pressing against the rumpled blanket and she saw that her arm was changing it was beginning to shrivel like a dried piece of fruit the veins began to stand out and the flesh began to sag and her fingers grew thin as twigs and she felt it happening all over her body as her sagging breasts lay on her chest like bags of wet grain and her bones grew brittle.

She remembered the first time she died and wondered what it would feel like again.

XII.

Kruse sat in the car and watched the hotel from across the street. The rain was coming down

harder now, hitting the ground like bullets and steaming.

They were up there doing God knows what. No, actually he knew it too, and it was sickening to think about.

The dykes were up there and they were fucking and they were laughing at him as always.

They'd been laughing at him just before he saw them in his bed, in *his* bed, fucking their merry heads off. He squeezed the steering wheel until his arms shook.

She hated him, he knew. Despised him. That's how she could do it and not care about how much he'd loved her, how much he'd always loved her. She enjoyed humiliating him. She'd loved it when that thug had tried to rough him up at the bar. She'd loved it when he didn't stand up to him. Well, he would pay for that. And so would she.

XIII.

She wore a long black raincoat with a hood and kissed him hard as soon as she stepped into the apartment.

"Hello, darling," she said and touched him gently on the cheek. Her eyes burned into him. She took off her coat and underneath she wore a white, high-necked blouse and black slacks. Her hair was pulled back with a bow.

She sat on the couch and crossed her legs and said, "Tell me about your day, darling."

He hung up her coat and went to fix two more drinks.

"See any of your dyke friends today?"

He paused in the pouring and then finished. He took a big swallow of his before he handed her hers.

"Yes," he said.

"How nice." She took a sip. "Did they let you watch them touch each other? Maybe a quick feel? Did they show how they fuck?"

He thought about Valerie's eyes and how different they were from Irene's. He didn't sit down. He stood in front of the couch.

"No."

She stood and pressed close to him. "Do you know how they fuck? It must be a terribly frustrating experience for them." She put one hand flat on his chest and moved it slowly over his shoulder.

"You're sick."

"Yes. So are you. Did you want to show them how it's done?" She cupped his groin with her hand. Her eyes were like bullets

He slapped her with the back of his hand. She fell against the couch and spilled her drink. He took a sip of his.

"Enjoy it?" she said looking up at him with a cruel smile. "I did. A nice touch, sipping your drink so calmly. You did want to fuck them but they wouldn't let you. And you want to fuck me too."

She backed away, and he felt him take a step forward with his fists clenched.

"Want to hit me again? Come on. Show me what a man you are."

"You are crazy."

"So are you."

He felt himself take another step.

"You enjoy the hurt, don't you. All those scars. I bet you've hit women before tonight."

Another step. She moved into his body, close enough for him to embrace her or to choke her.

"Admit it," she hissed. "You like it. *It's your name after all.*"

XIV.

She was taken in by the women who lived away from the Northmen. They cleaned her up and put her to bed and the next day they began teaching her. Eventually, she learned there was a lesson in every thing they did. Even simple things like pumping water and fixing fences were lessons. They taught her how to unlearn. They taught her grace and peace. The first and hardest lesson was how to breathe; everything else flowed from that..

"Not like that," the oldest one would say and shake her gray old head.

"You sound like an old man snoring," another would say.

"Not this in-out in-out," said the third.

The fourth one just rolled her eyes and muttered "I give up."

"Breathe like the wind," said another.

"Breathe like the river," another would say.

"Let me show you," said the youngest of the women. "They've been doing it too long, they've forgotten how a human breathes." And she took Valerie on her lap and put Valerie's little hands, her bandaged one too, on her own chest and stomach and Valerie felt the flow of the river there, like nothing she'd ever felt in herself.

"Oh, but you have known this breathing before," said The Youngest. "In the womb, we all breathe this way."

The Youngest held Valerie's body against her and Valerie felt the motion through her own body and tried to imitate it.

"No, don't try so hard, precious. Let it come. You'll remember."

Valerie listened to her voice, not the words, but the voice that sounded like wind moving over the water that glistened and sparkled and tumbled and fell. She felt the flow of life through the woman's body and through her own and her felt the heartbeat that counted the moments and days and years and she opened her eyes like it was a her first day again and saw the clarity of the colors and smelled the air and felt the earth. And all the women were around her, watching, and she knew she was

doing it right.

They called each other sister but always called Valerie by her name. One day she asked The Oldest about this.

"Because are not one of us, child. You are different. No, don't be angry or frightened. Your difference is what makes you special. Someday you will know."

And Valerie just accepted it because that was the way they always talked, and she knew no more answers would be coming this day.

Another day, a day late in fall, she was by the river practicing water-walking in the shallows. She had it perfect, and was disappointed because once she knew how it was done, the wonder was gone. Suddenly a sick feeling she'd kept down rose in her and her body cramped and she fell into the knee-deep water. She rid herself of the pain, but not the anger and she waded to the bank and she felt she was bleeding.

The sisters were puttering in and around their house except for The Youngest who was listening to the birds and managed to tell her what happened.

The Youngest smiled the way she had when Valerie learned how to breathe and told her what it meant.

"You are about to begin to learn your abilities," and she smiled again.

"What does that mean?"

"How long have you been with us?"

"Nearly one hundred years."

"Do I look older to you?"

Valerie compared the face before her with the face from so long ago.

"Your hair is longer and more gray. And your eyes smile more."

The Youngest laughed. "Such a way to put it! Thank you, Valerie."

"But what does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm going to teach you your last lessons, " she said and smiled sadly. "And then I'll be leaving."

"Leaving?" Valerie looked around and she saw they were alone. The silence around them was sudden. She knew the other sisters were gone.

"Alone?" Valerie said.

"No, Valerie," The Youngest said. "There is an entire world about which you know nothing. This is the last lesson I can teach you, but your education will go on and on."

Valerie felt the core of calmness deep with in her. "Show me," she said.

"Look at the tree," said The Youngest who touched Valerie's hand gently. "See how bare the gray old trunk is. See how it is preparing for winter. The leaves have dropped off."

"Yes."

"Let summer come again."

And there was a flash, a blink, and the tree was green again and full of leaves. The air was warm it was spring. She looked around. Nothing looked wrong. The birds were not surprised. A moment ago it was fall. Now it was spring. And apparently only Valerie was bothered by the sudden change.

"How did you-"

"You did it, Valerie."

"What did I do?"

"You sat here through winter."

"What?"

"Yes. Time is your enemy and your friend now. Look at yourself."

She did. Her body had changed. She was older she knew. Her breasts had grown, her muscles were stronger.

"Soon the changes you notice will stop. You will be a woman soon. Age and time will all be relative. Your life will not be easy. You must learn to use time because, Valerie, you will never die."

"And you?"

"I will go with my sisters. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

"Let spring come."

A blink and it was new spring and no one noticed except Valerie who was alone now. She stood. Her legs were longer and stronger. Her body was fuller, firmer. She pulled a twig from her long, long black hair.

She traveled and learned about her gifts.

She moved across what would one day be called Europe and into Asia. She went north and south, learning enough of the languages to get along and then moving on. In two hundred years she made it to China. She traveled by conventional means. She worked and earned money, and she did not need much to live on so she saved and booked passages to distant lands. She came back across borders that had sprung up and she got to know her home land again. She went to England when that was in fashion and she visited all the major ports. She created a family name for herself and said she was the last daughter of a family that had been destroyed in a horrible fire. She kept the lies simple and no one questioned her. After another hundred years of traveling, she met a man and fell in love.

He was as handsome as she was beautiful and she knew she was in love before he spoke. Then it was just a matter of time before he knew he was in love too and a little more time before they could marry. This was the longest, most difficult time she ever knew.

He was wealthy and so was she, and they were both loners. They lived away from other people and loved each other in a beautiful house or a large plot of land with a creek.

And one day she noticed that he was going gray.

She worried about it for weeks. She knew that he would die, she had known that all along, she she had loved him anyway. She had endured each moment knowing the precious value because his time was limited. She meditated alone and walked on the creek where it wasn't frozen. She decided to try aging for awhile.

Before long she too noticed a gray strand in her own hair. She regarded it with a mixture of fear and love.

She came into the house one early winter evening, snow falling from her long dress. She didn't bother to feel the cold this time in her excitement. The place was still and empty. Her husband was in his study reading. Her body filled with love for she new that beginning tomorrow they would grow old together. She tiptoed to the study. She loved to watch him unaware. Her fingertips brushed the handle when she heard the sound.

It was a sound she had never heard before, but she knew it immediately. It was a sound a living person makes only once. It was the sound of dying.

She threw open the doors and saw a woman like herself standing over her husband who was lying on the floor twisted and broken.

"Welcome, sister," the woman with long black hair said. "I came looking for you and found this mortal here. I wondered what he was doing in your home."

Valerie's breath was gone, cold terror had seized it, and it took her a stammering moment before she could speak.

"...my husband..."

"Husband?" How... bold of you. I wondered if perhaps you'd found love. I myself have not, child."

The woman toyed with an ivory charm at her neck. Her eyes pinned Valerie like a butterfly.

"It's one of the few things," continued the woman while Valerie struggled with herself, "that I have not done in my time. Like you I have traveled the world. I have found it tiresome. Perhaps you have not?"

She managed to shake her head.

"I thought that might be so. I noticed all the quaint little possessions you have filled this house with. It is not the behavior of one disgusted with this world. I see a touch of gray in your hair. I have tried that as well. Growing old is not as rewarding as you probably think. And for us, it has no end." She looked at her own young, strong hands. "Fortunately, it is reversible."

On the floor, the man was gasping. The woman looked down as if she was noticing a dog wetting the rug. "He'll be done shortly."

She peered closely at Valerie.

"You don't remember me, do you? Ah, well you were so young when they took you. Perhaps you need to reminded of the facts of our life."

She looked at Valerie and smiled kindly. "We are immortal. Nothing can kill us, yet with no body, there can be no life. You and I can heal nearly any injury we sustain. But if there is nothing left

to heal... poof, the spirit is free. Our physical lives are bound together, you see. As long as one of us still lives in our corporeal form, the other one is trapped. I'm tired of being trapped."

She stepped over him and moved toward Valerie. The woman's midnight eyes grew larger.

"I have decide to find out what else there is to experience. I am going to set you free." She picked a lit oil lamp up from the man's desk.

She moved around Valerie, between her and the door. The woman closed the door. Locked it.

"You are going to help me, mother." She threw the lamp to the floor where the man lay dying. Fire exploded from it and the man screamed. Valerie ran to him, but there was too much oil and too much fire and he wasn't screaming anymore but she was and the room was on fire, the floor, the walls.

The dark woman was laughing and screamed, mocking Valerie. She grabbed Valerie's arms and pulled her close and held her in a deadly embrace while the room burned and filled with smoke.

And maybe it was the smoke in the air and the woman was choking, or maybe Valerie was stronger, but it didn't matter and Valerie was a way from her and stumbled across the room over what used to be her husband and she went out the window, into the snow. And she was moving across the snow, but for what reason? The only purpose she knew in her life was a smoking pile of flesh and rags. Finally she stopped running and she stood and looked at the burning house.

When the people from the town come, the house is a total loss, but they go through the motions of trying to put it out. Valerie just stands, rooted to the spot. They get no response from her, no answer to the questions why and how. Nothing. She just looks at where the house used to be. Even when they bring her back to town and the doctor tries to get a response, she just looks off in the distance at where the house used to be.

The doctor keeps her warm and spoons food into her mouth while he tries to reach the family. Finally her brother-in-law responds, a man she met only once and didn't particularly like. He takes her, and he and his wife contact another doctor who works at an institution in Geneva, an asylum for women. Money changes hands and off Valerie goes to Geneva.

She sits not moving, not moving and they come and lean over her and and smile and talked to her and smile and move their mouths and frown and go away. But she just sits and doesn't say anything and doesn't move.

All around her they are moving their mouths but she doesn't understand and she doesn't move.

Sometimes she looks down at herself and sees she's naked and she curls up and doesn't move.

She doesn't move, she doesn't move but sometimes they come and uncurl her prying her apart and they spoon food into her mouth and they move their mouths and smile except when they make faces at her while they feed her. They are disgusted, disgusting and she looks down and sees she's naked and curls back up.

There are others like her. Other women. But they do not all curl up like her. They stay away from her except when one of the m shrieks and runs across the room to her and kicks her and pulls her

hair. Then she curls up until they pull the woman away.

She sleeps in her room every night and curls up in the big room most of the day. Sometimes she sucks on the smooth place on her left hand.

A woman comes to her and uncurls her and wipes her face with a wet cloth and the drops run down her face and the woman pulls shapeless and dingy white dress over her head. The woman helps her stand up and walks with her into another room. A room she remembers but does remember when she was in it. There are chairs and a desk and a man sits behind the desk and a woman with long beautiful black hair is there.

She is afraid, but the woman who washed her won't let her leave and sits her in a chair and they speak to her, but she doesn't know what they say. They move their mouths to each other and the man makes a face at her and leaves and so does the woman who washed her face. She is alone with the woman with long black hair who leans down close to her and touches her hair and face and smiles. And she speaks.

"Valerie," she says.

And she is Valerie and she knows the name and and she moves her lips and tries to make a sound but it has been so long and she makes a hoarse noise but it doesn't sound right and she tries again and says her name.

"Valerie," she says.

And the woman with the black hair smiles and kisses her and says the word again. And Valerie smiles and begins to cry.

The woman comes everyday now. At least it seems like every day and Valerie goes into the room with the desk but now there is no man there. She understand sit is an office and the man does not like to leave his office for Valerie and the woman with the black hair but he does it anyway.

The woman talks to her and Valerie hears the words and tries to say them.

Valerie knows that she is in a place for women who are sick but she is getting better now. When the people in the place move their mouths they make sounds now even though Valerie doesn't understand what most of the sounds mean.

They let her wear the white-gray dress now whenever she wants. And she sits now and doesn't curl up and she walks and stands when she feels like it. And she feeds herself.

The woman talks to her saying you have lovely hair, long and black like mine. She combs it while she talks to Valerie. Valerie can't remember where she heard the words before, but she knows them. She can't remember any place else but this place even though the woman said that she lived someplace else.

She can understand them now, the people who are also here but not because they are sick, they say. They are here to help the women who are sick. Valerie washes her own face now whenever she can and she washes her hair, knowing it will please the woman who comes to see her.

"Your hair is so lovely, Valerie. Long and black and now so clean. Just like mine, Valerie," the woman says. She is standing behind Valerie and combing the hair.

Valerie wonders what her name is.

Valerie speaks now. Just single words but she can say them to the people who work there to help her.

The woman is combing her hair and talking softly and Valerie clears her throat.

"Wh. Wh." She tries again. "What is your name," she says. "Name. What is your name."

The woman makes an excited noise and moves in front of Valerie and is smiling and touches Valerie's face.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you Valerie," she cries and hugs her. She moves back and touches Valerie's face with her hand.

"My name," she says, "is Isabelle. Can you say that?"

And the images fill her mind fire and pain and her hand, her hand it hurts and she screams and falls back and tears are pouring and she screams and there are noises, many voices and hands on her and she is struggling but there are too many hands and she is carried to a room and she is left there and she is still crying and she is alone.

She opens her eyes and looks around. She touches her face. It is wet.

Am I crying?

The room is small. A cot and a door. And it is filthy. She sees that she is wearing a filthy gray dress. No better than a sack with holes for her arms and head.

Where am I?

And she remembers.

XV.

There was a man who was killing women. Payne was assigned to the case. He knew the killer was male, that he had brown hair, that he was physically strong. Everything else was speculation. The women were all found in their own apartments. There was no sign of a struggle, in fact the women appeared to be willing participants in their deaths. The killer drank with the women, smoked some joints, had sex with them. And killed them. Three of the women had been found after they had been reported missing by family members. Two had been found by boyfriends with keys. One had been found

because of the smell. The police had nicknamed the killer Houdini because all of the women had been found tied with clothesline in various improbable positions. They had had intercourse with their killer that way and then he had killed them. One had been strangled. The rest had bled to death from enormous slits in their throats. Each wound was made by a knife from the woman's own kitchen. Other than their deadness, there was nothing to indicate that the women had not been willing participants.

Cyndi was living with Payne at the time. She thought it was exciting to be living with a cop. Payne thought she was an idiot. She was, but she was also a gorgeous air-head and she didn't talk much in bed, so he endured her. It was part of the usual cycle. Women, the stupid ones anyway, fell for him hard. They thought he was the strong silent type. They felt that his indifference was hiding some long hidden injury and that they would be able to heal him. They didn't realize until they had moved in with him that he would never open up to him; he remained indifferent to them. Then the tears and throwing clothes in a suitcase and the storming out and Payne would get himself a beer and enjoy the quiet.

It was sometime during this decline that Houdini began his career. Cyndi followed the case in the newspapers and cut out the articles and saved them. She asked Payne for the details that the papers glossed over. She found it thoroughly romantic that her lover was tracking down a sex-killer.

In bed she would ask questions:

"Payne? How does he tie them up?"

"Different ways."

"Every time?" Her head would be lying on his stomach and she would look up at him with puppy-dog eyes that made him uncomfortably aware of her submissive position.

"Yeah."

"Like how?"

"Some times on the bed. Hands and feet to the bed posts."

"Oooh. Kinky." He could hear the leer in her voice, but he tried not to think about it.

The evening Payne came home from looking at number six lying on her apartment floor in a circle of dried blood, Cyndi was waiting for him. He unlocked the door to a darkened room and he smelled pot and heard Cyndi say in a husky voice, "Hello, darling."

She closed the door behind him and pressed up against him in the darkness and pulled his jacket off. It was difficult because she was stoned and she giggled. She kissed him on the mouth and he smelled the heavy, sweet scent in her hair. She worked at his tie and giggled. Payne turned the lights on. She blinked slowly at Payne's face and giggled. Her pupils were enormous. Her blond hair fell in loose waves to her shoulders. Shark's teeth hung from her ears. That was all she wore. With Payne's help she got the tie off.

She pulled him close again and put her arms around his body. When she stepped back, she had his gun from his shoulder rig.

She giggled and took several steps back and pointed it generally at his chest. Payne felt the hair rise on his neck. The gun wasn't loaded, he knew that, but her giggle and the eye of the pistol were an eerie combination.

"Take off your clothes." She was held the gun with both hands and swayed slightly. Payne complied.

She jerked the gun. "Bedroom," she said.

She followed him into the bedroom. His bed was cleared of his blankets and pillows. They were stacked near the closet. On a night table, an incense stick burned, filling the room with a sickening cherry odor. Some joints were rolled and lay next to the incense. On the bed was a coil of clothesline. She sat on the bed and put the gun on the table. She lay back and gazed at him from under her eyelashes. She toyed with the end of the rope.

"I want you to show me how Houdini likes his women."

It was supposed to be sexy, but it chilled Payne. The women had died horribly. The smell of the days-old corpses came to him. The shock of the families. The pictures on the dressers and walls. The chill he felt every time he saw Houdini's work. The lives that had been so cruelly interrupted.

Still, there was something thrilling in the way Cyndi rendered herself helpless before Payne.

When Payne saw number seven, the chill came colder than ever. The coroner put her death at about midnight on the night he had shown Cyndi Houdini's technique. The police knew so little about the killer, but suddenly Payne knew too much about him. Knew him too intimately. He suddenly understood the thrill too well.

He resigned at the end of the week.

XIV.

She opened her eyes. It was raining. It was still dark. She sat up. She was drenched in sweat. She held her hand in front of her face. It was steady and strong. Young.

She got up and left the room and went down the stairs almost running. She flung the French windows open and went into the yard. The rain hit her face hard and cool and ran into her mouth. In seconds, her clothes were soaked through. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled close by.

XV.

He opened his eyes. He was alone in the room. Thunder rolled over head. His heart was pounding and he was sweating. He turned on a light and got out of bed. He went to a window and looked at the steam rising from the streets. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. He opened a window listened to the hiss of the rain. There was no sign of her in the apartment. He sat on the sill and flicked the ash off the cigarette. He was getting wet sitting there in the window.

XVI.

She heard the thunder but that wasn't what woke her up. The door. She rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb Suzanne, and stumbled through the dark to the door. She unlocked it and opened it a crack, peeking out.

"Yes?"

The door flung her back against the wall, knocking the wind out of her and closed again, but someone was in the room and there was a movement and felt the stab and heard the ripping sound.

XVII.

He was peeling an orange when Valerie Elmore called him.

"I hope you don't mind me calling you at home." Her voice sounded strained.

"No, that's fine. Is something the matter?"

"Suzanne is dead."

There was silence on both ends. The line made little electric noises. The air outside was thick with heat and drizzle.

"I guess she fired me to soon."

"The police are here. I felt I should call you before I mention your name."

"It's okay. Who's in charge there."

"A lieutenant named Esteban."

"Put him on."

There was a pause and voiced in the background.

"Payne? You involved?"

"I knew the decedent briefly."

"Like to pay us a visit, or will you be making lunch for us at your place."

"I'll be at the Elmore place in twenty minutes."

"How expedient of you."

Payne hung up the phone and finished peeling the orange. Between eat wedges of the orange he put on jeans and running shoes and a T-shirt. On his way out the door he grabbed his gray trench coat. In the car, Junior Wells sang "Stormy Monday Blues."

The rust-colored Plymouth nosed in the gate and up the drive. Two cruisers sat in the driveway, one behind the other. An officer sat in one of the cars with the window cracked open. Payne parked next to the cars so that he was not blocking them in. He got out of the car and flicked the collar of his coat up. The officer watched him walk to the front door and ring the bell.

A stocky sergeant opened the door for him and shut it behind Payne. Payne shook the rain off him and took off the coat and held it for a moment. It was either the sergeant or the coat rack next to him. Payne chose the coat rack. He walked into the kitchen and the sergeant followed him. Valerie was there. She was pouring coffee for herself. She looked at him and raised her eyebrows. She gestured

with the pot. He nodded and she got another mug and poured a cup for Payne. She wore a blue western-cut shirt and jeans. Her hair was pulled back with a piece of leather and a wooden pin. Her eyes were very dry.

Esteban sat at the kitchen table with a full mug before him. He was big with broad shoulders and a wide Hispanic face. His black hair was cut short and was beginning to thin. He wore a brown slacks that looked freshly ironed, a white shirt with the sleeves rolled carefully back twice. His tie was just perceptibly loosened and his brown rain coat was draped over the chair next to him.

Another officer in uniform sat at the breakfast counter, sipping from his mug. The sergeant who had opened the door leaned against the wall behind Payne.

Payne took the mug that Valerie handed him.

"So what happened," he said.

"We thought maybe you could help us," Esteban said. "Ms. Elmore wanted to wait until you were here before she would talk to us." He looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"You had a right to keep your name out of this," she said. "You have a right to hear."

"Why don't I begin," said Esteban. He consulted a note pad. "This morning a maid at the Residence Hotel downtown discovered the bodies of Allison Beatrice Kruse and Suzanne Jane Pulaski. They had both bled to death from stab wounds. The room was registered to Miss Kruse. Both women were naked. Both were mutilated. The weapon was a kitchen knife. It was found at the scene."

Payne's body felt like lead. He moved over to a chair and sat down. He put the cup in front of him.

"Luggage from both women was in the room. Miss Kruse's things were unpacked. Miss Pulaski's were not. Among Miss Pulaski's possessions was found a threatening letter from a man named Jonathan Kruse. We apprehended Mr. Kruse at his home this morning. He denies that he is the assailant. The envelope was addressed to Miss Elmore's home. That is all we have." Esteban spoke quickly without inflection.

"Like hell that's all you have," said Payne when the lieutenant finished. "But it's all you'll tell us."

Esteban shrugged. "Who would like to begin."

"I will." Valerie's voice was icy with control. "Suzanne was used to date Mr. Kruse. They used to live together, but the relationship soured after Suzanne discovered she was a lesbian."

The cop sitting at the counter made a noise of disgust. Esteban glared at him briefly. Valerie ignored him.

"She came to live with me. I had met her several months previously and were good friends. When we got the letter from Kruse, I became concerned for my own safety as well as Suzanne's. I hired Mr. Payne for protection three days ago. Suzanne was unhappy with that decision. She did not think Mr. Kruse was dangerous. Mr. Payne was fired."

She paused and took a sip of her coffee. "Suzanne was also angry with me because I hired Mr. Payne so she left. She said she was going to live with a friend until she found a place of her own. That

was two days ago in the afternoon some time."

"And you were lovers, you and Miss Pulaski?"

"Suzanne and I were lovers."

Esteban looked at Payne, neither believing nor disbelieving Valerie. "Well?"

"Yup," said Payne. "Ditto."

Esteban snorted. "Kruse tells us you pushed him around in a bar couple days ago. That's when the Pulaski woman fired you. Also said the decedents were lovers. Also said Miss Elmore and Pulaski were lovers." He glanced at the cop sitting at the counter.

"How about this for a theory. Ms. Elmore is jealous because the Pulaski woman is seeing others. She hires you to keep an eye on her, ostensibly as a body guard. The threat from Kruse just happened to come at the right time to make this plausible."

"'Ostensibly'?"

"Shut up, Payne. Pulaski fires you and leaves Miss Elmore. Payne, you follow her and, as per Miss Elmore's request, you kill them both. Like that, wise guy?"

"You know it's bullshit."

"Yeah." Esteban flipped the notebook shut. "But if I didn't know you personally and I didn't know Miss Elmore's reputation, I might be tempted." He sipped his coffee for the first time. He got up and put his coat on.

He walked to the door followed by the two officers. Valerie walked behind them.

At the door, Esteban turned. "Thank you for the coffee, Miss Elmore. I'm sure we'll be contacting you soon." It was much more polite than "Don't leave town," but it meant the same thing.

"Your welcome," she replied.

"Payne," he said and nodded and went out the door. Valerie shut it behind them. She leaned against the door for a long moment with her eyes closed. He heard the cars drive off. When she opened her eyes again, they were moist.

"That wasn't very smart," Payne said. "You lied and implicated yourself. You also didn't tell them about the phone calls Kruse made. "

"What lies," she said.

"You and Suzanne. You weren't lovers."

"Oh, yes. I forgot you are a detective."

She walked into the kitchen. Payne followed her.

"You and Suzanne did not sleep in the same room," he said. "You did not share a bathroom. She slept at the other end of the hall. She already had a lover. And it occurs to me that you did not tell the police that Suzanne left her boyfriend because her lover was her boyfriend's sister. They know that by now, but they don't know you knew it."

Valerie turned suddenly, her eyes were hot. "I lied because I will not abandon her. Even when she is dead. Too many people rejected her when she was alive. Her family, many of her friends. Because she was gay. " Her words came in a hot flow of tears. she was almost shouting. That odd

accent became more pronounced.

"I was one of the only people who stood by her! Even the people at the gallery downtown. They did not accept her *until* they found out, the hypocrites. Everything came apart around her, but she had the courage to be true to herself. So I lied. I lied to get you to believe me. To get you to work for me for the right reasons. Not because you wanted me! Now that she is dead I will not retract that lie just to protect myself." She was crying now and it wasn't sad, it was angry. Her chest was heaving and her face was twisted in anguish.

Payne stood there, isolated by the sounds of her hurting. He made some awkward gestures with his hands, tried to reach out to her, but he didn't know how. Her sobbing slowed.

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

She waved his offering down and shook her head, trying to bring herself back under control. She took a deep breath and wiped her face .

"No," she said. "I am not going to cry into your chest just because you are a man." She drew a shaky breath. "I like you. I wish this had not happened. Your clothes are upstairs where you left them. Get them. Leave. I will call you." She turned away from him.

He went up stairs and collected his things in his gym bag and left. When he walked out the door, she was sitting at the kitchen table with her face down.

XVIII.

Fortunately, he had closed the window in his office before he left the other night. Otherwise the room would have been flooded.

The rain hadn't quit yet, but it was seriously considering it when Payne began to clean up the glass and blood on his floor. The blood had dried into a crusty surface on the floor and it flecked some of the glass that was still there. There were track marks around the dried pool. And the stain would never quite come out of the couch. He put to use a mop he kept in the bathroom connected to his office. When the floor was clean, he went out for a sub and coffee that he brought back to the office. He sat at his desk and chewed and contemplated the couch. The blood stain was about as big as a dachshund. He chewed. He thought about Kruse for a while. His impression had agreed with Suzanne's remark. That he was like a castrated, angry little boy. Or course she was dead now. He took another bite of the meatball sub. Just the right amount of green pepper. He could buy a new couch, but that would be awfully expensive. Maybe he had pushed Kruse just too far. Maybe when it was him against the women, Kruse could afford to be castrated. Don't hit girls and all that. Maybe when Payne shoved his way in, that meant Kruse had to prove he was a man. That he had to take action. Maybe he could buy a used couch. But that was still expensive and who wanted to carry it up all those stairs? The women had been mutilated, stabbed with a kitchen knife. Esteban had said nothing about prints. That meant probably that there were none. Or at least none that matched.

He dialed homicide and asked for Esteban. After the usual runaround Esteban came on the line.

"Confessing, Payne?"

"Hardly. I want to ask you about the case."

"Oh, good. I was waiting around just in case you called."

"Prints."

"What about 'em?"

"Got any on the weapon?"

"Yes."

"Match Kruse's?"

A long pause. Then, "No. Don't match the decedents' or Miss Elmore's. She worked in a county office a few years ago. Wonder why a rich lady like that would be working in a records office." All county employees were printed and the prints were stored in a computer. Payne's prints were on file also.

"Oh. Still holding him?"

"Yep. No bail. Man's a real fruitcake."

"Thanks, Esteban. That's all I wanted."

"Sooo glad to be of service, Mr. Payne. Oh, by the way."

"Yes?"

"We checked your prints against the ones on the knife. You didn't ask about that."

"And?"

A longer pause. "You're still on the streets, aren't you."

He hung up. Maybe he should get the couch reupholstered. He bit into the sandwich again. Kruse would have to have been pushed pretty far to mutilate both women like that. Farther than being clever enough to get these unknown prints on the weapon. He might possibly have been able coherent enough to try to frame Valerie or Payne. But why some unknown person? He chewed on that. Maybe Payne could just bleed all over the rest of the couch so that it matched. If it was a crime of passion, Kruse would have left some sign behind or at least he would have wiped the knife clean or taken it with him. If it was a crime of cunning, he could easily have framed either Payne or Valerie or even his sister Allison. It didn't make sense. He swallowed the last of the sandwich and got up to leave. A little throw pillow would cover that stain nicely. He closed and locked the door behind him.

So if Kruse didn't do it, who did?

XIX.

They had taken his belt and shoelaces, his wallet, his keys, and a good measure of dignity before they put him in his cell.

He'd told them nothing. He'd kept his mouth shut and they were holding him until he admitted to the murder. He'd kept his cool. But the shock of discovering that Allison and Suzanne were actually

dead long after fantasizing about it for so long was like a sock in the gut. Even when he refused to talk they had fired questions at him. They were sure he was the one. They had him so confused. They had accused him enough times that now he wasn't sure he hadn't done it. He could imagine it easily. Walking in the lobby with the long, cool knife hidden up his sleeve. Leaving a message at the desk to see which numbered pigeon hole the paper went into. The ride up the elevator and the long, slow walk down the hallway and the soft tapping on the door. And then the knife was out and he was slashing...

But no. He also remembered quite clearly how cramped he had gotten sitting in his car and how he had finally just driven home and slept and slept until the rude banging on the door woke him. That too he could picture with amazing clarity. As clear as if he imagined it all.

He rolled over on the cot so that his back was to the cell door. The jail was cold. It was a chill that seeped into the bones and didn't leave. It had been raining this morning. He wondered if it was still raining. He pressed his hands between his knees and pressed his feet together to try and warm them. He could hear the sound of others around him, but they came to him disembodied like the sound you sometimes get at a movie when the screen next door is playing a horror film and the wall separating the theaters isn't very thick. The cell across from him was empty and the other three walls were made of cinder blocks. He lay on his side and inspected the texture of the wall up close. He tried not to think about his uncertain future. If the police could not find a better suspect there would be a trial and the public condemnation. And a psychologist would ask him questions...

He rolled over and a guard was standing at his cell,

"Visitor," he said and unlocked the door.

Kruse pulled himself up from the cot walked down the hallway with the guard close behind.

It was a small room with a table and two chairs. A room where lawyers usually met with their clients. A woman sat there now wearing a navy suit. She had long, black hair and a first he almost thought it was that Elmore woman and he hesitated just barely. But it wasn't and he sat down and the guard closed the door behind him. Kruse moved his chair at an angle so that he was not facing the woman directly but rather somewhere to her right. Her rested on the table top, her fingers laced together, and she was leaned forward slightly.

"Mr. Kruse, you have been accused of a horrible crime," she said.

"Are you a shrink? You sound like one."

"No. I am simply an interested party."

"Now you sound like a lawyer."

"I am a relative of Valerie Elmore's."

"Goodbye." Kruse got up to leave.

"Wait, Mr. Kruse. I am not making accusations. I am not acting on anyone's behalf. I would simply like to talk to you. Please sit down. Thank you. As I began to say, this is a horrible crime you are accused of."

"I didn't do it. I'm innocent."

"I am sure you did not kill those women, but I hardly think you are innocent."

"See here..."

"No, Mr. Kruse," she said and she spoke in calm near-whisper. "Please. Do not get angry. I merely ask you to listen. I understand your position. You are implicated by your own actions in this crime. And I am sure you have refused to answer their questions?"

"Yes." He gazed limply at the table top. Her voice rolled gently from her throat. The room was warmer than his cell. The air was thick and comfortable. He did not want to move just yet.

"Of course not. It is quite frightening to be accused by such rough men. They would surely never understand how complicated your feelings are. You are very sensitive and I know that. You feel horrible because somewhere down deep..."

Her voice trailed away, and Kruse did not move.

"Jon," she said gently. "I want you to do something for me, Jon. It is very important to me that you believe that I believe in you. I want you to look at me. Just raise your head a little and move your eyes so that you can see me, and you will know that I understand you."

Slowly, very slowly he shifted his eyes to the left and he could see her shapely, gentle hands and he raised his head and he saw her lovely throat and strong chin and jaw and her round, red lips that were parted ever so slightly and her nose was shaped so delicately and her dark eyes that welcomed his eyes in a warm embrace. There was a slight furrow of concern between them.

"Jon, I know how you feel because somewhere deep down you wanted it happen, and now you do not know if maybe you caused it to happen, and that makes you afraid."

She was right of course and it was a relief to hear someone admit it for him.

"And it was not just anger at Suzanne for leaving you, either. Oh, yes, I know that was there and that is what people will say. But some people like me will understand that it is more than that, something much older that you have never told anyone about, but you and I know what it is..."

His face was softening with sadness.

"And I know that it was not hate or anger that made this happen. It was hurt. Because she hurt you by going to someone else for love even after you had loved her for so long. And I was not just hurt that made this happen. It was love..."

His face was melting and breaking, and his eyes were filled, and when she said those last three words the tears released and flowed out and down.

"Yes. It was love. Because you loved her so tenderly. Do you remember the first time you touched her?"

"Yes." His voice was thick with tears.

"Wasn't it so lovely and beautiful?"

"Yes."

"And you knew she loved you. But eventually something happened."

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"She told," he sobbed. "Allison told Mom and Dad."

"Yes."

"And she didn't love me anymore and neither did they."

"It hurt."

"Uh huh. And they sent me away 'cause they didn't want me."

"But you still loved them."

"Uh huh."

"And your sister..."

"She wouldn't talk to me any more for a long time." He was breathing heavily and struggling with the words.

"But she did talk to you?"

"Uh huh. She wrote me letters and visited me at school 'cause Mom and Dad never did, and then they died."

"She loved you?"

"I thought she did..."

"But then?"

"Last time when she came, I saw them..."

"Allison and Suzanne?"

"Uh huh. They were together..." His voice dissolved in to sobs and moans. His face was a twisted wreck, and he clutched at his stomach, and his chest heaved.

She waited and watched with a small smile on her lips.

After a long time the sobbing subsided.

"You were very brave to tell me that, Jon. I am going to leave now, but I want to give you something."

"Wh-What."

"Some... advice. I want you to think of me and our little talk later on. I know that if you ask, the guards will give you a pencil and some paper. You may choose to write me a letter. You may also decide you want a way out." She reached out, and with the gentlest comforting touch she put her finger on his throat to the right of his Adam's apple and on the pulse behind his right ear.

"Goodbye Jon," she said and stood up. She walked to the door and pushed a button to signal the guard. A bored-looking gray-haired man open the door and waited for Jon.

Jon Kruse stood and wiped his eye and face.

"Thank you," he said to her in a whispered voice.

XX.

She spent the day in her study saying goodbye. She did not know if this was the end of her life or if it was simply the end of her life here. She had decided long ago that when death finally came, she would not run in fear. She would not seek death, but when it came love was the only reason to resist.

She had unlocked all the doors of the house. She knew that when death came it would have flowing black hair. She had felt the loss most acutely in that fire far away and long ago. She would not resist death a second time only to feel that loss again.

On her desk was a fire-resistant lock-box. It was open. Inside were the all the papers she needed for getting along in this age. Insurance, deed, bank accounts, will, and birth certificates. The names of a lot of dead children had lived on with Valerie. How ironic that her name for this lifetime was so close to the name she was born with high in the north lands. Ironic that things should come to a head now. She wondered how much longer she would be in this world. She wondered if the world would notice her passing at long last. The drizzle outside continued.

She rose from the chair by the window and stretched.

In the kitchen, she picked up the phone and dialed a number. It rang several times before the other end picked up.

"Payne, this is Valerie Elmore."

"How are you."

"Better." The darkness outside pressed against the windows of her house. The clock over the stove said nine o'clock.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at home again," she said. "Could you come over to the house now. As a favor."

"Is there anything wrong."

"No."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

XXI.

He was in his car and the tape was playing Bonnie Raitt's "Love Me like a Man" when the phone in his apartment began ringing. It rang seven times in the dark before it stopped. After a pause, it rang again. Ten more times. A minute later, the phone in his office rang. It rang five times before the answering machine clicked on. A recording played, asking the caller to leave a message after the tone. And then a beep.

Empty silence filled the room for a moment before a woman's voice spoke in a husky whisper.

"Payne... I want you."

XXII.

She opened the door for him and gestured him into the study and closed the door. The desk was as empty of papers as the last time he saw it. The lights were dimmed and the curtains were still open. Drops hit the window outside. She gestured to a chair by the window. On the small table there were some glasses and an ice bucket and a bottle of scotch.

"I wonder if you would care to get drunk with me," she said and smiled a sad smile. "I do not do it that often, so I like to make an occasion of it."

"Love to."

They sat and she put ice in the glasses and poured.

"Suzanne Pulaski and her art," Valerie said. Payne made a small motion with his glass and they drank. It was good and the library was a cozy environment in which sit and drink or sit and daydream or sit and do nothing.

"I know this library was your home," said Payne as Valerie poured their second drinks. "The rest of the house is beautiful, but it is just a house. This room is your home."

She paused for a moment in the pouring and looked at him as if she was surprised by his perceptiveness. Then she nodded and finished pouring.

"Tell me about yourself," he said as she handed him his glass.

She held the glass and looked at the amber liquid. "Nothing much to tell. I'm the only child of an old family from Europe. Like all the other old families from Europe that live in America, I have plenty of money. "

"You were raised in Europe?"

"Yes," she said slowly and took a sip.

"Your accent. I haven't been able to figure it out. It's so subtle. What country."

She shrugged. "All of them I suppose. I moved around a lot."

He nodded. He felt a buzz beginning.

"What about you."

His turn to shrug. "Born in Indiana. Moved to Oregon when I was young. I grew up and went to school there and joined the police. Came back to the Midwest and worked for the D.A. You already know the rest."

"Why did your family move." Her speech was blurred slightly.

A long pause. "After my mother died, I went to live with my uncles. They were carpenters. They raised me pretty much."

He stood and refilled his glass and walked over to the book shelves. He looked at the titles. He turned.

"Why do you live alone," he asked.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She poured another drink. "I," she began. "I am not sure I could tell you exactly."

He sipped his drink.

"I have lost a lot of people that I have known in my life. That was difficult. Perhaps I'm self-centered, but I'm not very interested in what happens in the world anymore. It has all happened before and will happen again. The world does not learn from its mistakes. And my life goes on in peace if the world does not intrude." She paused on something going on behind her eyes. She looked up at him. "You live alone. Why?"

"Freedom. Independence." He paused, searching for the words. "To keep my world under my control without obligations to other people. Freedom to choose and act as I see fit." He turned back to the books. "It can be lonely."

"Yes."

They both looked at their glasses and drank without speaking for a while.

"You let Suzanne in your life," he said.

"Yes. She was a friend. She was searching. Trying to find or build her own world. I admired that. I wanted to watch her, help her. I failed. In the end I forced her to push me away. I treated her like a child and then she had to leave."

"I thought of her as a child too," he said.

"She was young, but not a child. Maybe her search was what made her art so beautiful near the end."

"I never saw any of it."

A smile grew on Valerie's face.

"Come with me."

They went up stairs to the door to the attic. She flicked a light switch and they went up the stairs.

"I used this space mostly for storage. When Suzanne moved in, she clear some of it out to use as a studio."

The ceiling was a high peak with windows set close to the floor. A sheet had been spread and a few easels stood. Only one had a canvas on it. The back of the canvas faced the stairs and the had to walk around to see the painting. Dried paint was splattered on the sheet. Boxes were heaped in shadowy corners. This area had been swept of dust and cobwebs. Two standing lamps lit the canvas on the easel. There was a tape player attached to an electrical cord that snaked off into the shadows.

"She would listen to this tape as she worked." Valerie pushed the play button. After a moment, a fat-sounding blues guitar and a Latin beta filled the space. John Lee Hooker began to sing a moaning song.

"She kept this out of the collection she took to the gallery. When she left, she said I should keep it. I haven't looked at it since then. She called it 'The Blues'."

It was Valerie. Suzanne had captured an expression of blissful sorrow in blues and greens and light and shadows. In the painting, Valerie was by her window in the study. She sitting alone sideways in the chair and looking down while the sunlight streamed in behind her. It was a picture of solitude. It was incredibly beautiful. It was incredibly sad.

They stood next to each other and in the most natural of gesture she leaned against him and they put their arms around each other's waists. As smoothly as if they had been lovers for a hundred years. Or longer. The music played.

*The blues is the healer
All over the world*

The blues is the healer

All, all over the world

They turned to each other and their lips touched and they looked at each other with old familiar eyes. They kissed again, and with the sound of the soft rain outside, they made slow, gentle love before 'The Blues'.

It healed me

It can heal you

XXIII.

Sometime in the darkness of his cell, Jon Kruse, sobbing, killed himself.

Ed Burd didn't hear about it until morning, and it was only then that he remembered giving Kruse the pencil the night before. It had been right before his shift ended at midnight. All the lights were out. He was making one last stroll past the row of cells. When Kruse got his attention.

"Hey man, can you give me a pencil?"

"What? No way."

"Aw, c'mon."

"What you need it for anyway? It's lights-out."

"Can't sleep. I'm keeping a list of abuses for my lawyer and I want to write it down."

"Oh Christ." He peered into the cage. He could only dimly make out Kruse's shape.

"I'll keep your name off my list."

Burd looked behind him. There were no other guards around. All the other cells were quiet. He touched the mechanical pencil in his shirt pocket. The last this he needed was his name on another prisoner's list of abuses.

"Awright. But don't tell nobody and give it back to me tomorrow. Christ." And he held the pencil close to the bars and a thin hand darted out and took it.

"Christ," Burd said. The guy hadn't even said thanks.

When they found Kruse the next day, he was lying on his cot with his head and shoulders hanging off. He had bled to death from a hole torn in his carotid artery by the tip of the pencil.

XXIV.

They were always fighting but now more than ever because his father was drunk again, and his mother knew he was cheating on her. Only a curtain separated the six-year-old boy from the rest of the mobile home and they were not trying to keep their voices down. He was crying but he was quiet because he knew they would be mad. He felt it happening before he could stop it and he's peed his pants again. He stood up on the mattress, not daring to sit down and panicking. He looked around in the darkness of his room, his mouth gaping and his face wet from the tears. Nothing he could do.

He heard a slap, and he knew that sound well. His mother was screaming now and he heard a

sound almost like a slap but different. He knew the difference between a hand and a fist.

"Mommy?" he whispered, afraid they would hear.

The screaming went on.

He got down off the little bed and he peeked around the tired old curtain.

She was crying and had her hands up to her face, and he saw there was blood. She was shrieking at the big, dark, glowering man before her with his hands balled up tightly. The blue scarf that he had helped his mother pick out that morning was coming loose from her shiny blonde hair.

The man, his father, hit her again.

"Mommy?" he said again and wished he hadn't.

The man looked at the boy and shouted at him and pointed back into his room. The boy stood paralyzed with fear and man moved toward him and pushed the woman down when she tried to get in his way. The father grabbed his child's bruised wrist and slapped him and shouted. He looked at the boy's pants and made a disgusted face and hit him again.

The mother shrieked and brought something heavy down on the man's back. He turned to see her holding a big wrench. She held it like a baseball bat. He lunged and grabbed her wrist. With his other hand he began to peel her fingers away. She kicked and bit, but finger by finger he got it away.

And then he swung, and she stopped screaming.

The boy ran forward but was knocked down as his father pulled back to swing the wrench at the silent woman again.

And again.

And again.

The man rocked unsteadily on his feet. The only sound was his heavy breathing and the boy's quiet sobs. Blood and blond hair stuck to the head of the wrench. It fell from his hand, and he stumbled out the door.

The only sound was the boy's quiet sobs.

She got on her knees and looked at the rays of sun with the boy. He was grabbing at the dust that swirled.

"What is it?" he asked.

She smiled and her hair shone brilliantly.

"A sun beam."

"Sun beans?" he said grabbing at the dancing particles.

"Yes," she said laughing, and she grabbed some too. "Sun beans."

The only sound was the boy's quiet sobs.

One either side of the road, redwoods rose above them. They were on their way to the coast and still had another hour's drive, but Payne wanted to see the trees. So they pulled over to the side of

the road and the boy sprung out of the car and plunged into the forest. He dodged around trees wider than all three of his uncles. He heard them calling to him far behind, but he kept going.

Then he stopped. Before him was the hugest tree he had ever seen. It was bigger than a car. Bigger than his parents' trailer. Bigger than his uncles' house. It went up, up, up. He walked around the tree. It went farther than he could see. He couldn't hear his uncles anymore. Only the forest silence, quieter than almost anything he had known. Just him and this giant tree. Silent.

The only sound was the boy's quiet sobs.

XXV.

The morning sun woke Payne in the bed alone. The sheets were twisted around his body. The space next to him was still warm.

He got up and padded across the soft carpet to the window that overlooked the gazebo and the garden. The window reached nearly to the ceiling. It was divided into panes of glass a foot square. The light that came in through the glass was warm, but the window itself was cool. Payne unlatched the window and they opened inward, bringing a cool morning breeze. There was no sign in the sky of yesterday's rain. He saw the place where he had crouched so long ago. He stretched, digging his toes into the carpet and his hands reaching up, his fingers splayed out. Hanging on the inside of the bathroom door was a thick, blue, terry cloth robe. It smelled like Valerie. His pants were lying across the back of a chair, but his shirt was missing. So he put on the robe and went downstairs.

He found his shirt on Valerie. She had to roll the sleeves way up and it hung halfway to her knees. She was also wearing socks against the cold kitchen floor. She had tied her hair in a knot behind her head. She was making corn bread muffins and he stole up behind her and put his arms around her. He leaned over her shoulder and she twisted her head around and they kissed.

"Good morning," she murmured in his ear and put her fingers through his hair. "Sit."

He sat at the table where a glass of juice was waiting for him and he drank some. The kitchen was filled with daylight. Windows facing east and south let spring sunlight into the room.

"Sleep well?" she asked and she watched him from the corner of her eye.

"Mm hm." He drank the rest of the juice. The glass was polygon shaped, but it had so many sides that the mouth was almost round. Near the bottom, where the glass was thicker, there were tiny indentations in the surface. The facets of the glass sparkled in the sunlight.

She put the muffin tins in the oven.

"Dream anything?"

He nodded and then stopped as if he couldn't remember. He stood and walked over to the sink with the glass in his hand. He filled the glass with water.

"I dreamed about my mother." He drank some water. "About when she died." He drank the rest.

Valerie leaned against the counter that ran perpendicular to the sink. She watched him carefully.

"And another dream," he said. His hand was shaking. "About you."

She watched him.

"But I can't quite..." His eyes squinted in trying to remember.

She looked at the floor. "Do you believe in immortality?"

Their eyes met and he remembered and knew it was true. They moved toward each other and the glass slipped from his hand. His fingertips brushed her shoulders and his knees gave as the glass spun down through the sunlight and sent rainbows and refracted light rays up the walls and across the ceiling. Her arms caught him and pulled him to her chest as the glass hit the floor and didn't break, and it bounced and spun and colors and light went spiraling around the room. She had him but he was so heavy and suddenly so limp, and she went down with him to her knees, and the glass hit the floor again and spun and hit again and rolled and the sparks of yellow and red and green and blue zoomed across the ceiling like a meteor shower across the sky. And they came to a rest there on the floor. She held him close and tight. He was breathing quickly.

"Yes," he gasped. "Yes, I believe."

XXVI.

He remembered the second time she was born

There was a woman who lived among the Northmen. She had great power over the spirits and the men held her in high regard and they provided for her. She could tell them when the hunt would be good and when the time was right for battle. She was uncommonly tall and had hair that was blacker than black.

The chief feared her, but he could never let his warriors know for, although they also feared her, she was still a woman, and he was the chief.

She lived among them for many years. She never took a man and she never seemed to grow old. When the chief woke one morning and saw in the reflection of the water that he had a single gray hair, he feared that the woman was stealing his life. Still he could not let his warriors know he was afraid, and he could not kill her, for she was good luck to them.

One night, he left his own woman and snuck into her home and he forced himself upon her.

She never told anyone what had happened, and the chief was satisfied that he had claimed his strength back. Soon she began to show signs of a baby in her. She claimed none of the men for her husband and she stayed alone.

The chief came to see her, to find out if he could provide anything for her. She refused his help and sent him away.

Soon the baby was born, a girl with hair as black as her mother's.

Again the chief came and asked if he could provide for her and her child. Again she turned him away, refusing any extra help. Before he left, he noticed that there was a streak of gray in her hair.

Soon the girl became a young woman.

The chief, who had not seen her in a long time although he had benefited from her knowledge, came again to see the woman. He was surprised at how weak the woman had become. While her daughter had grown strong, she had grown weak. This time the woman accepted his help. The girl, she said, was powerful and evil. The child was stealing the woman's life and soon she would die. If she died, her daughter would leave the Northmen in ruin. To save the people, he must attack the daughter the way he had attacked her.

That night, he left his own woman and snuck into her home and forced himself upon the daughter.

The next day, the woman was dead and the daughter said nothing about the chief.

Soon she began to show the signs of a baby in her. She claimed none of the men for her husband and she stayed alone as her mother had.

The chief feared the daughter and he stayed away. The black-haired daughter would not tell the people when the hunting and fighting would be good. Hard times fell upon the Northmen. They were afraid to kill her and she still took their food.

Soon the baby was born. She was a girl with black hair. She was a strange child who never cried. She looked at her mother with accusing eyes. The Northmen came to believe that the woman's mother had died and was reborn now as her daughter. They believed that the woman had returned to save them from her daughter.

This made the woman fearful, and she took a knife and cut off her child's little finger to keep as a charm against her. When she spilled her daughter's blood, the child cried out for the first time. The warriors heard her and came running. They saw the bloody hand and they threw their weapons at the woman and chased her, but the woman escaped into the hills.

The men held a meeting on what to do. One man suggested that they let their wives raise the strange child. Another man suggested they go out into the wilderness and leave the child to die. An old man spoke up. He was so old that none of the other men could remember when he had been young. The old man reminded them of the legend of the women who lived in the west. They kept the sun when it went down and they never aged or died. He said they must take this child to those women to raise, because they would know what to do.

So the chief said, I will go and take the child to these women. I am old and my time is near its end. I will take the girl. He did not tell his men that he was responsible for everything that had happened.

So the day came when he left. He said goodbye to his son who would be the new chief and goodbye to the old man. The old chief took no food with him and he walked off with the baby in his arms.

His men never saw or heard from him again.

XXVII.

Blackness and warmth.

And suddenly light and he gasped for air.

He opened his eyes.

He was still lying on the floor of the kitchen. His head was cradled in Valerie's lap. The glass was lying on the floor away from him. Valerie's face was tense with concern. She was brushing his hair back from his forehead. He smiled up at her and she relaxed.

"Good morning again," he said. "I remember it all now."

He sat up and leaned against the cabinet doors under the sink. "Boy that's quite a jolt."

He felt dizzy for a moment, but it passed.

The room was filled with new light. The textures of the floor and wallpaper drew his eye.

"It's fantastic," he said and his voice sounded far away to him. "It's all inside my head."

"What do you remember?"

His eyes moved around the room, but he was looking within, as if he was faintly hearing a piper's tune that he knew from long ago.

"Everything about your life. The way you remember it. But it's not confusing. I know everything about you. You're all inside me. Your childhood. I remember The Younger. I know what China was like five hundred years ago." His tongue moved around inside his mouth. "I know what buffalo tastes like." Again the far off piping. "My God! I remember being born the second time!"

He grabbed her hands. "Will it stay with me?" He looked at her face searchingly.

"No. The images will fade."

"It's marvelous!" His eyes squinted, seeing someone that was almost there. "Your husband..." and he was filled with the memory of grief. But he moved on, discovering information in places he had never known before.

"You have loved other women."

"Yes. Does it bother you?"

"No," he said. "It was beautiful." He was searching again. He laughed suddenly. "Now I know how menstrual cramps feel!"

She laughed.

"What else," she said.

"I know you love me," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you," he said, "have my..."

"Yes."

"Then you know... I'm not proud of my life..."

"I know."

"Then... how can you be so sure?"

"I've known you before. I understand all the things that shaped you."

"I'm not your husband."

"Not anymore," she said. "You are also not who you were yesterday."

The birds twittered outside the kitchen windows. The earth went on.

"They are fading."

"Yes."

"But... the feelings are there." A vibration of a memory lingered where there had been an image. It was fading as quickly now. Only a few strong memories remained.

"My God." This time it was horror. "Isabelle."

Valerie nodded. "Irene Flood."

"I feel sick," he said. "What have I done."

"You are safe now," she said. At first she had feared it was too late, but now they had taken on each others wounds and healed them. It was intimacy beyond anything that could achieved by speaking. It was empathy, communion, union. They were fortunate he had not been lost to Isabelle. She had probed and reopened many of his old wounds. She had almost made him a prisoner of them.

XXVIII.

They had to leave, of course. They were together now and intact, so they had to escape while they could. Call it running away, call it a retreat, call it a strategic regrouping. Whatever it was called, they had to leave. And then Esteban called and they knew the danger was even worse.

Kruse was dead, he told Valerie on the phone. Suicide. He'd gotten a pencil from a guard and opened up an artery with it and bled to death. Made him look guilty as hell for the murders. Case

closed.

Suzanne, Allison, and now Kruse. She was getting closer and it was time to go.

XXIX.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he was running away. Fleeing the Midwest on the heels of a few deaths like before.

He sat in the airport bar with a two dollar Coke while Valerie bought the tickets. The bar was too dark and too phony. A TV set was showing a baseball game in one corner and a coin-operated machine was playing pop tunes too loudly. Some men in suits were acting too drunk as they ordered another round of drinks which were too weak and too expensive. There was a frantic panicked edge to their laughter. It was strained and high-pitched. The laughter of men trying desperately to look like smooth player. They were the only people in the bar besides Payne and the bartender.

Payne and Valerie had stopped at his apartment and he had packed a bag. It happened too fast for him to think about it. Now he wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

In two gulps the two dollar Coke was gone, and Payne was wondering how much the bar pretzels would cost him, when Valerie walked in. Like the first time he saw her, she walked with a confident step and a regal set to her shoulders. She carried a shoulder bag that was too big to be a purse, but too small to be a steamer trunk. The bartender made gin and tonics that were mostly tonic as he watched her move to Payne's table. She sat and put the tickets on the table in front of him.

"Two one-way tickets to Portland, Oregon purchased in the name of Mrs. Andrea Buckholtz."

"Mrs.?"

"Widowed."

"Esteban told me you worked in a records office. Mrs. Buckholtz is one of your creations?"

She smiled and inclined her head and lowered her eyelids as if taking a bow. "I also called my property manager on the coast. She'll have the beach house cleaned up by the time we get there."

"What does she think your name is?"

"Beatrice Collins."

He jiggled the ice left in his Coke glass. "How many names have you got?"

"Six. I have an apartment in New York and a condominium in South Carolina and a villa in Cagna." She sighed. "It's what keeps me going, really, knowing I am responsible for so many lives."

"Ha, ha," he said. "Let's leave this place. Too depressing."

They walked to the gate area. Through the thick glass windows, in the distance, planes taxied to and away from the terminal. Further away, a plane gathered speed and lifted effortlessly off the ground. The distance to the planes disguised their enormity. The illusion was broken when a plane approached guided by a man with orange batons.

Payne wandered into a news stand that mostly sold paperbacks and magazines and candy and copies of *USA Today*. He poked around for a few minutes before Valerie followed him. He bought a magazine, and she bought a paperback. A voice announced that they could board their plane. They

showed their tickets and walked through the tunnel to the plane and found their seats.

"First class," Payne mumbled. "Nice." Valerie took the window seat and Payne sat on the aisle.

Valerie took the novel from her bag stowed under the seat in front of her. It was a Raymond Chandler. *The Big Sleep*. She showed it to Payne. "It's about a detective," she said. "You ever read his books?"

Payne shook his head. "Makes me feel like I'm doing my job all wrong," he joked lamely.

She watched him avoid her eyes. He looked out the window across the aisle. She touched his hand. He looked at her.

"What is it?" she said.

He shrugged. "Would you believe I'm afraid of flying?"

"No."

He shrugged again and looked down the aisle at the front of the plane. About half of the first class section was filled. About half was empty. In twenty minutes the plane was in the air and the Fasten Your Seatbelt sign was off. And Payne had said nothing more to Valerie. The flight attendants brought drinks. Payne had a 7-Up and Valerie had nothing. Occasionally she would lift her head from her book and look out the window. Payne would admire the curve of her jaw and cheekbone and the straightness of her nose. He would notice the red of her lips and the vacancy of her gaze. Her hair was clasped back with a metal clip that had a design that matched her earrings. Then her eyes would drop back to the pages of the book and she would continue turning them automatically. And Payne would notice her ageless hands that wore no rings and were one digit short. On her wrist was a chain bracelet with wide links.

Eventually, he turned to his magazine and read half the cover story until he stopped and realized that he had no idea what he'd just read. He stuffed the magazine in the pocket in front of him. He looked past Valerie at the clouds and he looked at the backsides of the flight attendants. He closed his eyes trying to sleep. He calculated the time of their arrival in Oregon, taking into account the time zones, until his head spun. He wondered what time zone they were in.

He glance over at Valerie again. She was looking out the window again. He knew that she was oblivious to the passage of time now. It was all relative to her. Whether it ran backward or forward or stopped or crawled or dashed by. She was an outside observer of mortal history.

His own hands were scarred by the passage of his life. Sometimes he felt a twinge in the knuckle of his little finger of his left hand and in the first joint of his index finger on his right hand. The shirt he wore bore the signs of its age. A thread poked out from behind the fourth button from the top. The button of his left cuff was not one that had come with the shirt.

He almost looked at her perfect, unlined face again. But he stopped himself and tried to sleep instead.

They rented a car using Beatrice Collins' name and Payne drove on highway 205 and changed to

30 and to 90.

Finally, Valerie broke the silence tenderly. Again she touched his hand gently.

"Tell me," she said, soft but insistent.

He sighed and said, "I don't like this. I don't like running away from things. I've done it before and I still don't like it."

"I am bothering you too."

He nodded, kept his eye on the road. "I don't know how to feel about you. We're out here on your money, using your resources. You've got these names and other lives I don't remember anything about. I feel like I'm not in control of my life anymore. Makes me feel like a child." He shook his head, confounded. "At the same time, I know that you aren't going to die. Time won't kill you like it will kill me. Makes me feel old."

For a while, the only sound was the road and traffic.

"It is harder than you think," she said. "I wake up in the mornings and wonder what the point is in getting up. There is always tomorrow. Always. It is hard to care about anything when you know you will outlive it all. When y..." She stopped and started again. "When my husband was killed, I lost everything. I lost my future. I was stuck in a never-ending present. When I came out of it, I began to work and plan for my survival. I gave me a purpose until I found a real reason to stay alive. I've managed to acquire more money than I will ever need."

When I first saw you, I knew who you were. I knew your soul was tortured by your past. By a past you do not even remember. I knew that you would end my mere existence. Give life meaning. These other names I have are just names, disguises. Until now, I was barely alive."

"What about the past we are leaving behind?"

She moved closer to him on the seat, put her hand on the back of his neck. "We have a whole future that has not been told yet. We have time for everything."

And they drove.

The house was not actually on the beach. It stood on a cliff two hundred feet above the water. From highway 101, they turned up a narrow gravel road and drove past mobile homes thickly crowded by pine trees and bushes. The road ended in a T and the house sat on the opposite side. From here, the house was mostly hidden by trees. A mailbox and a blacktop drive that led past the screen of trees were the only giveaway.

The house had two sections. The single-story half was mostly one open room. One corner was a kitchen with a stove built into an island and a dishwasher and cabinets against the wall. Another corner was the dining area. It had a table and chairs. The rest of the room was a den. There was a fireplace and a couch and chairs and a stereo. A glass door led out onto a deck that ran the length of the house.

A short hallway led to a bathroom with a glassed-in shower stall and a bed room. The hallway ended at a door that open into the rest of the house.

The other half was two stories. There were two rooms on the first floor that were mostly empty. They had glass doors that opened on the deck. There was a utility room with a washer and dryer. Under the stairs was a closet with a grill and beach blankets and hedge-trimmers and more things in boxes stowed away. Upstairs was divided into two big rooms that connected through a door and a bathroom that connected to both rooms. The room facing the trees and the road was a library with a writing desk. The other room was a bedroom with a wet-bar and a small refrigerator and glass door and a small deck. The bathroom was almost as big as Payne's office. There was a dressing table and a chair and a dresser and a bathtub the size of a walk-in closet.

The house had a big, airy feel. it had more rooms than two or even three people needed, but it could fit comfortably like a big cable-knit sweater.

The five o'clock west-coast sun was still high, but their stomachs were several time-zones ahead and said it was past dinner time. Payne rolled the grill out on the deck and found a bag of charcoal and some lighter fluid and cooked the hamburger they bought at the market on the highway on the way in. The drop to the water which was a cliff in front of the house became a gentler slope on either side. Beach stretched out to the right and left of this spot. Some kids and a dog played in the cold, foamy tide. To the right, the north, the beach stretched into the haze. A mile to the south, the beach ran up against a rocky cliff that poked a long finger out into the water.

They put mustard and pickles on their burgers and drank water and ate potato chips.

"Tomorrow," he said. "What shall we do tomorrow."

She finished chewing, took a sip of her water. "Tomorrow, we shall walk on the beach and pick up sea shells. And maybe the next day, too. The possibilities are endless."

He smiled a smile he didn't feel and took a bite.

The sun went down like a dying heart. It was slow and lingering and the color bled into the sky. Orange faded to red and purple. The ocean turned black. The surf boiled and hissed on the sand. The moon rose and made jagged, dancing sliver slashes across the water to the horizon. The beach glowed faintly with dark driftwood shadows. To the south, the cliff stood a starless, invisible presence-- something unseen but felt.

XXX.

To get to the beach they walked down the road to the south and followed a path that took its time sloping down to the sand. The cool ocean breeze kept the sun from getting too hot. Valerie wore a light top and pale blue jeans rolled up her calves and no shoes. Her hair whipped in the breeze and let the tide cover her ankle while she poked around for seashells. Payne sat on the sand wearing jeans and a T-shirt. Valerie trotted up to him and sat next to him, breathless.

"It's so beautiful today," she said. "maybe I'll take up painting."

Payne nodded absently.

"What's wrong?" she said. "It's a beautiful day."

"I have to go," he said.

The smile left her face.

"I have to get my life started. I can't idle away the days like you can. I don't have as many."

She looked at the water.

"I can't just run away from my life," he said.

She looked away from him, at the cliff to the south.

"I'll call a cab and move my things to a hotel. I'm going back in a couple of days. I'll call you."

"Bastard," she said.

He got up and walked up the path to the road.

"Yeah," he said.

XXXI.

He checked into a hotel, the Sea Breeze inn, a mile on the other side of Pequot. A sunny-faced girl gave him his room key and he carried his own bags to his room. The room was a faded blue and offered cable TV for a premium. The hotel was on the wrong side of the highway for an ocean view, so he opened a window to try to smell a sea breeze. After a few minutes of highway exhaust, he gave up. He paced the room thirty-seven times before he went stir-crazy. He put on some shorts and a pair of running shoes and went out.

Pequot Bay, population 1200, had the usual coastal town tourist traps. Whale watching was the favorite pastime even though it was really not the right season. There was gift shop after gift shop along the highway and a plenty of parking on the sea wall. Fishing boats chugged in and out of the harbor every half-hour. Sea gulls flocked around the piers scrounging for leftovers while fishermen cleaned the fish the tourists caught. The sea gulls were patient, dodging the occasional pebble thrown by the occasional child while the fisherman watched the gulls with a gleam from the corner of their eyes, knowing that a casual flick would send the birds squawking after a salmon heart or liver. The Dairy Queen was busy as was the Sea-Shell Restaurant, Pequot's finest dining establishment since 1976. The expensive hotels were perched on cliffs just outside of Pequot on either side. Ocean view rooms went for twice as much as landward rooms. The residents of Pequot lived in cottages lining the streets behind the drag of gift shops. The trailer parks were further down the highway surrounded by pine trees on the inland side of the road.

Payne puffed along the shoulder of the highway into Pequot past the art studios that featured only seascapes by resident artists. He slowed to a walk when he got to the sea wall where the tourists were perched with their binoculars scanning the horizon for puffs of spray that betrayed the presence of whales. Below the tourists and their children the water leapt against the wall sending roaring splashes up that hissed away again.

Payne ducked into the DQ for a vanilla cone with sprinkles served up girl of fifteen who was dying to meet someone to take her away to the big cities like Portland or Salem. Outside, the ocean

breeze the sweat on Payne's body and he walked up the hill behind Gift Shop Row. There was a tiny, forgotten-looking supermarket here. It was awkwardly hidden away from the tourists who much preferred to spend their money on the hotels and restaurants like the Sea-Shell. It was hidden away from the tourists who didn't want to see the little hamlet as a real place where real people lived. It was hidden away so that the tourists wouldn't see that Pequot wasn't quaint-- that it was really just dumpy. Next to the market was a record and tape store. It was the place where the DQ soft ice-cream jockey could buy the latest tunes from the latest teen heart-throb. The place was just this year beginning to sell CDs. This was Pequot after all.

An old-looking woman with a sagging face and breasts wheeled a shopping cart into the grocery store. Her hair was in curlers and she wore slippers on her feet. She had probably lived in Pequot all her life. She was probably no older than forty-five. Payne finished the cone and jogged back down to the highway and out of Pequot. He preferred the illusion even though he knew it was just that.

He jogged along the highway. This was the same place he had known as a child. A gray little village eaten by the salt air. The name was different maybe, but in all the ways that it mattered it was the same. He was near the house now, maybe only a mile away. Dirt roads lead down to the water and he followed them past houses with rickety porches and mean-looking dogs chained in the little plots of dirt and sand and patches of grass that passed for front yards here. Salt-eaten pickups rusted away outside of shacks that were once garages but were now too filled with other rusted things for the trucks to fit. Every one of the houses here had an animal of some kind, and Payne understood why. This was not meant for tourists. It was a lonely place here, the kind of lonely that needed only a mean dog to make it complete. Maybe it was a perverse sense of independence that brought one here. Maybe it was a place for outcasts. Payne knew there was only a little besides a mean dog that made him different from the people who lived here. The road was dotted with little mounds of dog shit and it eventually sloped down and became more sand than dirt and he was on the beach with cigarette butts and sticks of driftwood to his right, the ocean in front of him, and on his left was the cliff he had seen from the house.

It was cool in the shadow of the cliff and the sand felt thick and cold. Gray rock that looked like slate rose in a smoothly jagged way a hundred feet above him where tufts of green poked along the edge. Payne followed the cliff until the character changed. It was low tide now and the cliff grew rockier and more sloped along the side where high water would have covered it. Half-covered stones poked out of the sand like the skulls of buried skeletons. Surprisingly round boulders sat unmovable on top of each other in precarious-looking positions. Sand and pebbles piled into the side of the sloping wall. Payne hoisted himself onto one of the boulders and scrambled onto the cliff. The slate had more cracks and shelves here and soon he was on top of the projection that trailed out to the water. He stepped among the rocks and across gaps until he was surrounded on three sides by water. It was blue here, and perfect. The sun dazzled off little crests. He had a sense, as the water moved in to the shore past him, that he was rushing out to sea. He let the illusion wash over him and he imagined himself in the middle of the ocean perched on a tiny island of slate with no other land in sight. The blue water

looked warm and cozy and inviting.

But of course that was a lie.

He turned and faced into the land. He walked up the projection where the sides were steeper. Where it began to level out, grass grew in tufts that became larger farther in. To his right, the side facing away from the beach he climbed up from, there was a short drop and a rocky plateau and more boulders and craggy projections. On this side the water stretched out and away. The beach on this side was recessed in a cove that Payne could not see from here.

He jumped down onto the plateau, feeling like a child again. Like a child escaping from a world he knew too well. He moved out over this hidden landscape. He pulled himself up outcroppings, the rough edges scraping his arms and legs, and pushing himself over the tops. Again he saw the beckoning sea below him. He asked himself a question he had asked many times before. *What's to stop me from letting myself fall?* Nothing. There was nothing to stop him except himself. The strength in his arms and legs that kept gravity from helping him to die. It was an old acquaintance, death. A friend of the family. The one you can always count on. A friend of his mother and father. A fellow who dropped in on his uncles unexpectedly for brief visits. A colleague in his work. Death was always there in a cold but comforting sort of way.

The water lapped against the rocks below him. They had all gone the way of the sea eventually. Some had dived in. Some had slipped in slowly, testing the waters. Some had been pushed in. Some simply disappeared when your back was turned and the only trace was a few bubbles on the surface.

He closed his eyes and let the sounds fill him. If you put a shell to your ear, you can hear the water. If you listen to the water, you can hear your life. His father was in that water; he slipped into the sea while he was in prison. Leaving for his son... what? Nothing but the knowledge of how attractive destruction can be. And his mother? A life trying to love destruction and life, but never being quite satisfied with either. And his uncles? A life staying afloat, trying to show their sister's child that it could be done. But of course one gets tired after awhile. Some of them tried to show him different ways to swim, but Payne was too frightened to do anything but dog-paddle.

It was a stupid metaphor, the sea, for life or death. A stupid attempt to give meaning to something that had no meaning. Something that just was. Something too big to judge. Leave it alone. It was stupid to keep looking. Like trying to find a wife who hated her husband enough to leave him. Once you find her, then what? You can't force her to go back. Then you stop taking jobs like that. You figure you won't take the jobs that lead to hurt, only the ones that lead to joy. But they all hurt and you find yourself looking for the wife or husband hoping that maybe there's still some love. But there isn't. And you keep finding the rottenness and the agony in other people's lives, and you wonder how they can live with it once you've found it for them, but you don't look at your own because you may find that your own life is just as bad.

Payne turned and moved back to the top of the cliff. He looked at the horizon, feeling that maybe there was something there, something just out of sight worth looking for.

And then one day something comes in to your dim and hopeless life. Something really good that

you are afraid of because it might not be real. And you let it go. But if you are smart you take it and hang on because it might be real.

He moved down the side of the cliff the way he had come. The climb was easier going down than up. The tide was coming in and up to his knees when he touched the sand. The water tugged at him as he slogged up to the dry sand. He took his sopping shoes and socks off and wiggled his toes in the warm sand. It stuck to his feet. He walked on down the beach.

His feet were dry and brushed off and he was sitting on the deck when Valerie drove up. She got out of the car and hesitated before she shut the door. She carried some plastic bags in one hand, and she walked around the car and up the steps to the deck past Payne. She stopped at the door.

"I left it unlocked in case you came back."

"I wanted to make sure I was still welcome."

She opened the door and walked in. She left it open behind her. He got up and went in behind her. He left his shoes on the deck to dry out some more.

"I've been thinking about getting a hair cut," she said. Her back was to him. "I've never had one, but all this sand..." She faced him and her voice trailed away.

"I'm stupid," he said. She took some books and a tape cassette out of the bag. "I was afraid. I still am, but I want to try." His eyes were still dazzled by the sun. Everything was dim and vague to him. He could just make out that the tape cassette was the same one that Suzanne had owned and that they had played.

"What about our lives." She stopped moving, holding a book half-in and half-out of the bag.

"I can't give up what I am. I've been doing it too long and I don't know anything else."

"Will you live with me?" She set the book down.

He shook his head. "I can't yet. But I can love you and make you part of my life." Slowly, his eyes were adjusting.

She flicked her black hair with a casual gesture. "So we go on living alone?"

"No. Just separate."

"Why?"

She was clear to him now. The rest of the room was still shadowy, but he could see her, and he felt human.

"I..." he made tiny gestures with his hands. "I have to pay my own way for now. You're used to preparing for the future. I've just been living day to day. I want to be part of your life for as long as possible, but I need something of my own for when I've got nothing else but you. I can't give myself up entirely. I can't give your life meaning. But our love can give us reasons for staying alive."

Valerie stepped forward and kissed him.

"It is not what I had in mind," she said. "But I can live with it. If we stay together, then it is fine."

They kissed again.

"Will we stay on the coast?" she said. They moved over to the couch and they sat facing each

other. "There are details we need to work out."

He shrugged. "I'll have to find a place big enough to support my work. The house is lovely here, but I don't think there's much demand for gumshoes in Pequot."

She nodded. They kissed some more, longer, more languorous. After awhile she pulled back.

"You are all sandy. I don't relish the idea of sand in my bed."

"We're going to bed?"

"Not if you are all sandy."

"Give me ten minutes and I'll meet you upstairs with nothing on."

They kissed once more. Payne tried not to run to the bathroom. He turned on the water and threw his clothes in a pile on the floor. He was under the spray when he heard the bathroom door open and close. He could see her pale, naked body through the rippled glass.

"Decided you couldn't wait," he said and hurried to rinse the shampoo out of his hair. The shower door slid open behind him and he felt her step in and press behind him. Her hands moved through his hair working the water through it. Her fingers moved lightly over his shoulders. One hand moved down his left arm with the soap and the other down his right side.

Payne made contented noises.

The soap slipped out of her hand and her grip tightened on his forearm. She heaved against his right side and propelled his left arm through the glass, she was pushing on his shoulder, trying to press the shards of glass that stuck in the frame into his tricep. He choked, gasped and held himself up from the floor of the stall with his right arm and he was resisting her with his left, but she was using all her weight. He saw blood, lots of it, mixing with the water and running down the drain. He pressed up hard and grabbed her behind her knee, pulled and she was off his shoulder, and he heard a crack against the tile of the wall. She was cursing. She pushed against his back, but he had her legs and was tugging it so she couldn't get any leverage. But he was dizzy, and then she shoved his arm forward against the edge of the hole in the glass and she slipped her leg away from him. He was pulling his shoulder away from the bloody edge and she slid the door open, hard, so that she had his arm caught on both sides between the glass. He was down, his other arm trapped under his body and he couldn't pull himself up. The water was turning darker almost as fast as his vision.

And then the pressure was gone. She had slid the door back to change her leverage and slam it on his arm again. He was only dimly aware of what was happening now but knew he needed to move. He pulled. His arm came free and some glass, too, but when she shoved the door, it just bounced against the rubber stopper.

She slipped on the wet floor, cutting her palms on the glass that lay there, but she was up again and ready. But nothing happened. She looked in the shower and he was down and not moving. His face in the water, lying on the drain. His arm was bleeding, lying awkwardly at his side. The shower was still going, oblivious to it all, and filling up the tub with pink that was rising over his ears.

She sat with her back to the door. Valerie sat with a sheet wrapped around her looking out onto the deck. The door was open to the sound of the ocean. She was listening for Payne's steps, and when she heard them, they were light. He was sneaking up on her. They came across the bed room, and she turned suddenly, to surprise him before he could pounce. But it wasn't Payne.

"He's dead," she said. She was wet and naked and her hands were bleeding some. The ivory charm hung from the thin gold chain.

Valerie took a step back.

"You didn't really think you could get away from me so easily, did you?" She moved next to the bed and sat on it and leaned back on her arms. She crossed her legs and pointed her toes. She looked down her shin and pursed her lips. "I suppose you want to know how it is I always find you, don't you? It's very easy. I just know. I get this tingling sensation when I move towards you and it gets stronger as I get closer." She laughed sharply and moved one hand between her thighs, leaving a streak of blood where her hand had been on the bed. "I sure am tingling now."

She felt helpless and she backed against the glass door. It was cold and unyielding, but nothing like the fear she felt.

She stood and turned. "The ocean certainly is lovely." She toyed with the gold chain. She held it up. "Do you know what this is? It's a bone. I ate the meat off of it. Sweet, tender meat. It was your finger. From your," her eyes flicked down briefly, "left hand. I wouldn't expect you to remember, Mother. You were rather young. You tasted so good." She stepped forward. "And tonight." Another step. "I'm gonna feast, honey."

Valerie flung herself across the bed at the woman and they both went down. Valerie's thumbs sought out her windpipe and tried to avoid the hands clawing at her eyes. She tried to move her body to pin the woman, but she was too slow and she felt feet shove against her chest and stomach and then the other woman was almost on top, but she rolled and swung a fist that caught the clawing demon on the side of her head. She got up, but the woman got her leg and she went down again. Valerie kicked until she was free and backed away and got up. The other woman got to her feet. Valerie felt the cold glass behind her again and saw the door across the room. They were both panting. The other woman was bleeding from her swelling nose.

Valerie moved away from the door and the woman leaped at her and they went out onto the deck. Valerie fell hard against the rail and knew enough to stay down otherwise she was going over. But the other woman was faster and got low first and got Valerie under her arm and pushed up and bent Valerie over the rail. Valerie knew the rocks were down there and the water was smashing against them. She didn't need to look. She knew that this was something that could really kill her once and for all. She swung at the woman's head and knew they were good hits but she felt herself going up--

--and Payne shoved the piece of glass deep into her side and she let go of Valerie and swung at him and he fell but his flailing hand caught the gold chain and tugged her off balance and snapped it--

--and she ducked down and caught the woman the the stomach with her shoulder and shoved up and the woman went over the rail without a scream--

--Her face hit the cliff and her neck snapped back and her body tumbled over and hit the cliff once more and cracked before smacking into the water--

---Valerie cried out and fell hard to the deck as thunder crashed through her and--

She opened her eyes and it was an instant before she knew where she was and who she was. Her heart was pounding enough to burst, but it slowed and she lifted herself up and saw him naked and bloody, curled on the deck. As she moved to help him she dislodged the bit of gold and bone at the edge of the deck. It fell and hit the cliff near the top, where the slope was shallow. It rattled down and fell away and down into the water and disappeared forever.

XXXII.

It was night. A fire was going and Payne sat on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table. His upper arm was stitched and bandaged and healing nicely. The stereo was playing John Lee Hooker.

I'm gonna tell you a story

A true, true, true story

About love

Valerie came and sat next to Payne on the couch. She was wearing a pajama top. Payne was wearing the bottoms. He put his good arm around her and ran his hand through her short, black hair.

"Still feels strange," she said.

"I like it," he said. "Sometimes you have to cut the past away."

"Once you've dealt with it."

They cuddled without speaking for a while.

"We have to get up early tomorrow," she said. "The plane leaves before noon."

He nodded. "After that I'll just need a couple days to get my things in order and we can come back."

"And then?"

"We resume our lives."

They were quiet again and the fire crackled low.

"What are you thinking?" he said.

"Death is the mother of beauty," she said.

"Who said that?"

"Wallace Stevens."

"Ah. And the point?"

"Life sure has become beautiful to me."

They kissed and watched the fire and fell asleep on the couch while the fire burned and stereo played softly.

Ain't no substitute

Ain't no substitute

For love.